

Chapter One

Growing up, every kid thinks they're special. Not me. Normal parents, normal school, normal life. Overall, I was about as normal as they come. But my best friend was anything but normal.

Her name was Myrina, and whenever we were together, there was bound to be trouble.

"Roll me, Carter!" Myrina said, arms tucked tight inside an abandoned tire we'd found by the side of the road.

"You sure this is safe?" I asked, cheeks puffy with baby fat. The two of us were about ten years old at the time.

"Who cares! Push!" Myrina yelled, and I pushed the tire.

She rolled down the street within it, squealing all the while. I raced along behind her on foot, trying to catch up. But the gentle slope soon became a hill, and she started rolling faster.

"Myrina, you're going too fast!" I yelled.

She giggled, as I raced to catch up. Down the street, there was a car coming our way. From the speed of the vehicle, it didn't look like the driver had seen us.

"Hey!" I yelled, waving my arms. "Stop! My friend is in that tire!"

I yelled, trying to get the driver's attention, but it was an evening in winter and the sun was already below the horizon. The black tire rolling down the middle of the street was hard to see amidst the evening shadows. From the glow on the driver's face, he was probably fiddling with his phone and not looking at the road on this quiet suburban street. He wouldn't spot Myrina in time.

My yelling must have gotten his attention, because he glanced up and saw the tire rolling toward him with Myrina inside it. He swerved, avoiding her by mere inches. But the sharp turn took him out of his lane and right in my direction.

My heart leaped in my chest as the twin headlights of the sedan barreled toward me. Time slowed, and I felt my short ten years of life flash before my eyes. But then the car came to a sudden stop, as surely as though it struck a brick wall.

The hood crumpled in on itself, and the entire car twisted, metal hissing in protest. When it finally came to a stop, the bumper bore the imprint of two child-sized hands sunk into the steel, exactly matching Myrina's outstretched fingers.

She stood between me and the car, back bowed and hands planted on it with a grimace on her face. I hadn't even seen her get out of the tire still rolling down the street. She'd moved faster than my eyes could follow and stopped a car with her bare hands.

"Are you okay, Carter?" Myrina asked, pulling her arms free from the bent and battered vehicle.

"Yeah..." I said, glancing at the busted-up car and the dazed driver before us. "We should get out of here. He's going to be mad about his car."

The two of us ran off into the woods, out of sight before the driver recovered his wits enough to unbuckle his seatbelt.

As the years passed, the legend of the car accident grew into something of a local mystery. Handprints on the bumper, a driver with a strange tale to tell, but no answers anywhere to be found.

People came up with all sorts of explanations for the crash. Maybe he'd hit a deer that limped away from the scene, and the similarity of the dents to handprints were just a coincidence. Maybe the driver faked the strange accident to make an insurance claim.

Nobody suspected the little girl down the street and her best friend.

That wasn't the last time Myrina exhibited abilities beyond the norm. Once, when playing baseball with her, she hit the ball so hard that the metal bat broke in two and the ball flew so far that we never did figure out where it came down.

Another time, when we were trying to start a fire and couldn't find any wood, she punched a dead tree until it fell down, then split the chunks into firewood with a chop of her bare hand.

I was young back then, but I wasn't stupid. I realized the things she was capable of weren't possible for a normal human.

"Myrina?" I finally worked up the courage to ask the question that had bothered me all summer and fall. "Are you an alien? Like, some kind of superhero in disguise? If so, you're not very good at hiding yourself," I chided her while we were playing on the beach.

It was winter, and chilly sea-borne winds whipped through the barren sand dunes tracing the shore. I was bundled up tight, but Myrina wore her usual shorts and t-shirt without a care in the world. She brought a jacket just for looks, but had tossed it aside at the first opportunity.

"I'm great at hiding myself!" Myrina replied. "I just don't have to around you."

"Why?"

"Duh... because you'll keep my secret."

I nodded. "Makes sense. But tell me! I wanna know!"

"Hmm... I'll tell you under one condition." Myrina put her hands on her hips and grinned.

"What?" My eyes brimmed with childish curiosity.

"You have to pin me to the ground in a wrestling match!"

"Ha, you're a girl. I'll totally beat you," I teased.

"As if. I'm a tough Amazonian princess! You? You're more like the scrawny wizard type," Myrina replied. Then, without any warning, she dove at me and dragged me down to the sand.

I lost that wrestling match, and the one after it, as well as the next two that followed. I wasn't really sure how I ever thought I could win in the first place. The girl could stop a car with her bare hands. She could overpower my entire body with just her little finger. I had no chance of winning against her.

Every time I brought up her mysterious powers, she brought up our little bet. The day I finally beat her would be the day she revealed her secret to me.

I spent months roaming the local quarry looking for strange meteorites or green rocks that I could wave at Myrina to see if they would nullify her powers. I tried drawing weird diagrams and chanting. I even tried begging her to give me super strength as well, so I could finally beat her.

"Ha! There's only one way to get as strong as me!" Myrina replied. "Slay monsters and gain levels!"

"Like in a video game?" I asked.

"Yeah, like a video game."

But try as I might, I couldn't find any monsters to slay. I wasn't about to go crawling through the woods hunting wild animals, so I confined my tests to the occasional bug here and there. Many of them were nasty-looking things, and in my search I found a log with a couple of tiny snakes under it. I hoped that I'd finally hit the jackpot and had found some real monsters to slay. I didn't get any levels, though, no matter what I tried.

But I did remember something—Myrina was afraid of snakes.

That was when I got another idea. I picked up one of the snakes and stuffed it in a jar for safe keeping. Maybe these things couldn't make me as strong as Myrina was, but perhaps they could help me beat her another way.

And so, the next time I pestered Myrina about her abilities, she challenged me to another wrestling match.

"Ha, got you again, Carter!" Myrina teased as she pinned my right arm over my head and sat straddling my stomach. Her grip was like iron, and I didn't have a chance at breaking it. But I kept struggling all the same, just to make sure she kept both arms on that hand. "Give up and admit I win again!"

"Oh yeah?" I asked, grin splitting my face as I opened my jacket pocket. I pulled out the jar and twisted it open with my free hand, then dumped the live snake on my chest right in front of her.

"Ah!" Myrina screeched in surprise and disgust, jumping off me in an instant.

I'd looked these snakes up online and learned they were basically harmless, but Myrina didn't know that. She screeched and squealed, just as planned.

"Eww!" Myrina said as I picked the snake up and waved it at her.

"It's coming for you, Myrina!" I cackled evilly as I waved the snake at her, dangling the creature in her face with its tail pinched between my fingers. "It's going to get you!"

"Carter, drop that thing!" Myrina said, scrambling backward.

"No way. This little guy here is my new buddy. I'm going to bring him with me on all our new adventures!" The snake wiggled as I dangled it in front of Myrina's face.

"No! Carter, get rid of it! Snake monsters are dangerous! It's going to eat you!" Myrina yelled.

"I'll only get rid of it if you admit defeat."

"That's cheating!"

I shook my head. "That's strategy!"

"Okay, okay. I admit defeat. Just get rid of it!" Myrina yelled.

I set the snake back down on the ground, and it slithered away through the sand while Myrina scooted across the ground to prop herself up on a fallen tree trunk. I sat down next to her.

"Well?" I prodded.

"Well, what?" Myrina pouted. Her cheeks were puffed up and her face locked in a scowl.

"I won. Now you've got to tell me your secret!"

Myrina was silent a moment. When she spoke, her voice was quieter than before. "I'm not supposed to share this with anybody. My family will be mad if I do."

"Tell me!" I insisted. "I won, and you promised!"

"Okay. I guess I did promise..."

"Tell me! Tell me! I promise to keep your secret." I was so excited. Was she part of a government experiment? From an alien planet? Was she secretly a robot? I couldn't wait to find out.

"I'm from another world," Myrina explained. "We live under the authority of a powerful intelligence known as the System. I guess you earthlings might consider it to be an Artificial Intelligence. It's with us all the time, and it monitors our growth while helping us get stronger by fighting each other, as well as monsters. The levels I've mentioned before are something I earned by training with my clan back home. We're a clan of Amazonian warriors who live in a sprawling empire. My father is the king of an allied world, and my mother is the matriarch of our clan."

"A clan of Amazon women..." I frowned. "Like Wonder Woman?"

"Yeah, but we don't chase off men. It's just that we only accept the strongest," Myrina replied. "If I brought you home, you'd probably have to fight like a thousand other guys in duels to the death."

Her voice got so quiet, I had to lean in to hear what she said next. "It can get pretty scary."

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you have to fight duels to the death?"

Myrina shook her head and smiled smugly. "Nope! My clan captured a bunch of monsters for me to fight so I could gain levels quickly and easily! All the tournaments I fought in were only till one side surrendered, not to the death."

I frowned. "That doesn't sound fair."

Myrina told me all about her home world. There, her family dominated a vast swath of territory on a massive alien planet. They wielded swords, axes, spears, and other melee weapons in a never-ending fight against the local monsters and other Amazonian clans. It was quite the fantastical story, and my young mind was completely enraptured.

But eventually, the sun started to set, and I was getting cold.

"It's getting dark and I have school tomorrow," I said. "But tomorrow you're answering the rest of my questions! I want to know all about this Amazonian Empire!"

Myrina gave me a smile. "Sure. I'll meet you here tomorrow! Same time and same spot!"

I returned home, was scolded by my parents for staying out so late, had dinner, and then went to bed. School passed swiftly the next day, and I could hardly wait to get back to the beach to talk to Myrina again.

But when I arrived at our usual spot, she was nowhere to be found.

"Myrina?" I called.

All I heard was the sound of the wind whistling over the rocks.

I went back to look for her the next day but she wasn't there. I tried again the day after, wondering what was holding her up. Maybe her parents had grounded her for staying out so late.

I tried every day for the rest of the week, and then every day the following week, as well. I didn't see Myrina a single time. I even checked the sand for her footprints and got excited a few times when I thought I saw signs of her. But when I saw my own prints next to them, I realized how old they were. She hadn't been here in weeks.

But even the house where she used to live was gone. I remembered her living just a block and a copse of trees away from me, but when I tried going over to her house, there was just an empty plot of land dotted with trees. It was city property, and always had been. It was like she'd never existed at all.

Weeks turned to months, and months to years. I never forgot about my best friend, Myrina, but I did move on.

By the time I entered high school, I only visited that spot on the edge of the beach once a month or so. I made new friends and picked up new hobbies—like table-top RPGs and video games. I even used Myrina as the inspiration for a barbarian character I played in one of our long-running Dungeons and Dragons sessions after school.

As my memories of her faded with my childhood, I began to think the amazing things she could do had been nothing more than the overactive imagination of a child. Perhaps we'd played pretend so well that those things we made up started seeping into the things we'd actually done.

I looked for her online, hoping to get in touch with her again. But there was no sign of her. She wasn't on social media, and public records didn't mention her—not once. I ran her name through a search engine every once in a while, but couldn't find her anywhere. Maybe she dyed her hair and changed her name, but I still thought there must be some sign of her out there, somewhere. There had to be some trail I could follow.

More than a decade later, I lay on the beach in our spot in the middle of winter. I'd come back from college, almost done with my senior year, and wondering what I was going to do with my life.

My parents had passed away in a house fire the week before, just as I was finishing up the semester's final exams. I stared up at the nighttime stars, wondering why I was alone, and the world seemed so dark and empty. A single tear dripped down the side of my face as I lay there on the sand.

And then, suddenly, someone was laying there next to me. I wasn't sure when she appeared, or how she'd gotten there, but she lay on her side with her cheek resting on her hand. She ignored the night sky and had eyes only for me.

"Hello, Carter. Sorry I'm late."

I jerked upright, wiping my face with my sleeve.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there. I'm not sure how—" I tried to push myself to my feet, but the woman twisted her leg over my waist. She straddled me, pressing her stomach against mine with her bosom pressed to my chest.

This was the first time I got a good look at her in the dim starlight. Long scarlet hair cascaded over her shoulders. High cheekbones and a firm chin spoke of a noble bearing; that thought was reinforced by the silver circlet that wound around her brow. It was hard to tell with us both laying down, but she was almost as tall as I was and had the toned figure of a career athlete. She wore leather and steel scale armor over her body, and I was pretty sure I felt a scabbard pressing into my thigh. I wasn't able to look, though, because a pair of piercing green eyes bore straight through to my soul.

"Don't get up. I have a lot to say and little time to speak." Her hot breath tickled my neck, and if I wasn't transfixed by her gaze. Any man would have been hypnotized by those plump red lips.

I spoke the words that lay inscribed on my heart, left there and abandoned on that beach so many years ago.

"Myrina... is that you?"

She pressed her hand to my lips. "It's me, Carter. I'm sorry I had to leave so suddenly. Our time on Earth came to an end unexpectedly when our clan went to war back home, and my education had to be accelerated. But I'm here for you, now; I'm here to warn you. The System that came to my world so long ago is headed for yours. Life as you

know it will come to an end, and your world shall be drawn to mine and those like it. When this happens, most of humanity will die. Only the strongest of you will survive to see the end of the integration, and I want you to be one of the survivors."

I gulped. "What do I need to do?"

"Fight, level, and conqueror," Myrina replied. "And take this. When the day finally comes, I'll be able to explain more."

Myrina reached into her pocket and withdrew a gold medallion the size of a quarter. It had a small hole punched through its top and a strip of leather tied in a loop ran through it. Myrina looped the leather string around my neck and tucked the medallion beneath my shirt.

"Keep that safe. Survive long enough to activate it, and I'll be able to explain more then. Just remember, the Integration is coming, and the end of the world is near. The System will bring an apocalypse to your world with its arrival."

I felt her lips press against my cheek, and I reached out to touch her. But my hands found only empty air. Just like before, Myrina was gone.

But this time, she'd left something behind for me. My fingers wrapped around the medallion Myrina had given me, still warm with her touch.

"So... a system apocalypse, huh..."

Years have passed since that day. I graduated from college, found a job, and moved on with my life. But I never forgot Myrina or what she'd said to me on that beach. There were plenty of things out there we didn't understand, but those few minutes with her stood out more vividly than anything else in my memories.

Sooner or later, this apocalypse would come to Earth.

So, I prepared. I picked up a few survival skills here and there and explored the wilderness in the town I found work in after graduating from school. It even motivated me to spend a little extra time in the gym. I'd never been what you might call athletic. Hell, without the looming threat of an apocalypse, I probably would have spent my days on the couch instead of pumping iron.

I think that, without Myrina's warning, I would have wasted away. I would have become just another face in the crowd, dying one day at a time as I wasted my life. But every time I looked at Myrina's token, I felt new determination flow through my veins.

I would survive this apocalypse. I would kick its ass, and then, when it was over, I would see Myrina again.

"You're late," Sakura said as she pulled open her door without looking up from the electronic tablet in her hand.

Sakura was my boss and also the daughter of the company's owner. She was a slim woman of Japanese descent on her father's side, though I wasn't sure if she'd ever been there herself. Her hair had a gentle curl from her mother's Italian heritage, and she wore glasses that made her look like a schoolteacher. In public, she talked with stiff formality, and she walked like she was constantly trying to prove she was worthy of her

position for her competence, not just because of her father. All in all, she was a little bundle of ferocity, and positively adorable—in a mousy sort of way.

“So, what’s this super-secret meeting all about?” I asked as I closed the door behind me.

The moment I did, Sakura’s stiff back melted, and she closed her tablet’s screen. She was a little too obsessed with making sure she projected the perfect image of a hard-working supervisor to the rest of her employees. But somehow, I had won her trust.

“Craig,” she said. “He has to go.”

“Oh, boy, what did he do this time?” I wondered out loud.

Craig was the office asshole. He was our security guard, but not a real one. He’d been a nepotism pity hire after he’d flunked out of police academy. He’d only been hired because Sakura’s father had owed someone a favor. It turned out there was a reason he’d flunked out of police academy, and it wasn’t because he got framed for smuggling drugs, like he claimed.

The man had a chip on his shoulder and was convinced that everyone should cower in his presence. Maybe he mistook the fear for admiration, or perhaps he was just a colossal asshole—right down to his shriveled little heart. Whatever the case, he was a constant thorn in the side of everyone around him.

Problems with that idiot had been shuffled up the chain of command all the way to Sakura at this small branch of her family’s company. And now, I suspected she was trying to pass the buck to me.

“He’s been harassing that new intern, Bridget. You know the one. Blonde hair, pretty eyes. Cute girl. Firm ass. I saw you looking last time she went on a coffee run,” Sakura said, speaking as plainly as though she were talking about the weather.

I raised my hands in a gesture of innocence. “Hey, I may or may not have looked... I admit to nothing!”

Sakura pushed her coffee cup aside and placed her hand on top of mine. “I know you were just looking. It’s fine. Craig finds her attractive as well. But you aren’t a pig in the shape of a man. Craig is the one I’m worried about.”

I sensed this was taking a dark turn. “What did he do?”

“Nothing... yet. But he’s been harassing her every time she enters the building by herself. Bridget hasn’t made a complaint, but I’ve been watching the security camera footage and know she’s been dodging him whenever she can.”

I shook my head. Sakura really needed to learn to relax. Not only did she run half the department by herself, but she also watched the security cameras like a hawk, keeping an eye on everyone in the office, at all hours.

“So, you want to get rid of him before it becomes an issue?”

Sakura nodded. “The trouble is, Craig is a big man. And his file from other departments says that he can sometimes be aggressive, especially with women. I’m sure he’ll try to intimidate me if I fire him.”

“I see. So you want me to kick him to the curb, instead? I’ll have to warn you, he’s going to demand to see you anyways.”

Sakura shook her head, readjusting her glasses as they slipped down her nose. “No. I’ll fire him myself. I just want you to stand behind me so he doesn’t think he can scare me.”

I chuckled. “You have a higher opinion than I do of my intimidation factor.” This, at least, would be a lot easier than having to give Craig a stern talking to, like I originally feared.

Still, it was a tall order. I wasn’t in terrible shape, but Craig definitely took steroids. You didn’t see his build on anyone short of movie stars and other folks who worked out like it was their full-time job. That was probably part of the reason he did the constant dick-measuring alpha-male-bravado posturing he was so fond of.

“I just don’t want to be in the room alone with him. Especially when I know I’m going to make him angry,” Sakura said, lips drawn tight. “I need someone I can trust to have my back.”

I gave her a pat on the back. “Well, you’ll have to make do with me.”

Sakura smiled. “And after this is done, I have another favor to ask. My father is hosting a social event, and it will look odd if I show up alone. I’ll give you double overtime to keep me company.”

I shook my head. “Sakura, if you need an emergency date, just ask. I can’t say it sounds like it’ll be fun, but I’ll do it. And you don’t have to bribe me, either. I may be your

employee, but I'd like to think that we are friends, and I don't mind keeping you company outside of work."

Sakura's laughter joined mine, though hers was a bit forced. "Right... an emergency date. I'll email you a reminder and set an appointment for you to get a good suit. The party is in three months, so you have time to get something tailored. I'll lend you a company card to pay for it."

I spent a few minutes teasing her a bit about using Daddy's money for a date, but she took it in stride. She needed some mental preparation before firing Craig, as whatever he was likely to do afterward would probably ruin the rest of her day—mine, too, if he was enough of an asshole about it.

Eventually, though, we could delay the inevitable no more. I sighed as I picked myself up off the corner of her desk where I'd been sitting and headed for the door.

"All right, let's get this over with," I said. "I'll call Craig in and stand behind you while glaring menacingly."

Hunting Craig down proved rather difficult. He wasn't in his office, which explained why Sakura was watching the security cameras. He clearly didn't take that part of his job very seriously, since he didn't even have the program open. Usually he flipped between a bodybuilding forum and a social media feed filled with women a bit too scantily clad to be checking out on the company's laptop during the workday.

Today, he was up to something a little more difficult, it seemed. He was watching a YouTube tutorial on how to put together a handgun from its individual parts. It looked

like he'd watched the video multiple times, and the gun depicted lay in pieces on the table in front of his monitor.

Yeah, he was definitely getting fired. I was pretty sure rent-a-cops in our area weren't supposed to walk around armed. Good thing the gun was in pieces, otherwise Sakura might need to call the cops before she felt safe kicking this idiot to the curb.

If we were in high school, I would have called Craig a typical jock—he certainly fit the stereotype. He was like every other kind of asshole you'd see in movies, but didn't think could actually exist in the real world. I could envision him bullying kids out of their lunch money with perfect clarity.

Maybe those movies had something to them, after all. I guess he was the rare asshole jock who had enough connections to keep on being an asshole after moving out into the real world. If I were an asshole who didn't hang out in my supposed office, where would I be?

From what Sakura said earlier, I thought to check for Bridget. Sure enough, she was out on a coffee run, and people were wondering what was taking her so long. I was pretty sure I knew what had held her up. She was the reason Craig wasn't in his office.

Bridget had been using the rear entrance to avoid him up until now, but he must have caught on to her tricks, because that was where I found him.

"These are getting cold. Please move," Bridget huffed.

"I'm just saying, it's rude of you to bring coffee for the damn keyboard jockeys, but not for a hard-working man of the law like me," Craig said. "It's downright disrespectful."

“You didn’t ask,” Bridget replied. “Everyone is expecting me to bring back their orders, so please, let me through.”

“I think you need to apologize. Make it up to me. And in the meantime, I’ll be taking one of these.” Craig snatched a coffee and took a swig.

He regretted it a moment later, instantly spitting the coffee back out on the ground. “The fuck is this? Peppermint? Yuck.”

“That was supposed to be Sakura’s coffee...” Bridget grimaced.

“Well, she can have it. I’m taking this one. And then afterward, you can clean that shit up... and polish my boots,” Craig said as he gestured to his spit and peppermint coffee all over the ground, some of which was indeed on his boots. He grabbed another cup of coffee, this one of a more acceptable variety.

This idiot was a real piece of work. A veritable douchebag, to be sure, but even I hadn't expected him to be quite this much of a prick.

Perhaps Sakura hadn't been joking when she'd warned me that he was even more of an ass when alone with women, than when he was with the guys in the office. I reckoned it was time to step in and put a stop to his crap. After today, neither Bridget nor anyone else would have to deal with it again.

“Bridget, there you are! People have been wondering where you went. Come on.” I waved as I descended the stairs, and Bridget ducked under Craig’s arm to escape.

When she passed by me, I plucked Sakura's coffee—now covered in Craig's spit—and took it from the tray. "And you can keep this." I thrust the tainted coffee back into Craig's hand.

Craig glowered at me. I sensed him lean forward onto the tips of his toes. In doing so, he loomed a little taller. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Craig snarled.

I raised an eyebrow and cocked my head back toward Bridget's fleeing form. I could see her peeking at us through the door as it closed. "Do you always talk like that to women?"

I wasn't all that fond of seeing people getting fired. In my opinion, most companies didn't value their employees enough. And while Sakura seemed to value me, I couldn't say this place was really any different than the other corporate mills.

But this asshole? Yeah, he deserved to be shown the door. The sight of him packing his belongings in a cardboard box and turning in his ID would probably result in a cheer from just about every section of the office.

"And? So what if I do?" He smirked. "Do you think you run this office just because the slut in charge thinks you're her friend? Have you even fucked Sakura yet?" Craig moved closer, pressing his chest against mine.

He was admittedly half a foot taller than me and twice as wide, but I held my ground. Bridget was waiting for me just up the stairs, and I'd positioned myself in front of a security camera. I knew Sakura was watching.

“It’s no wonder you have such a hard time finding love. As for Sakura, that’s not any of your business. But I suggest you stop worrying about my personal affairs, because you’re about to have some bigger problems of your own.”

“Follow me. Sakura wants to see you in her office.” I turned and started up the stairs, not bothering to check and see that he was following me.

Something primal seemed to realize I’d gotten the better of Craig in that exchange. I’d beat him at his own game, and it made me feel a little smug. Mine was a mild reaction, but enjoyable, nonetheless. Perhaps I could see why Craig played his little power-trips after all.

But Craig’s reaction was anything but mild. He cursed up a storm. I’m sure he thought it was under his breath, but it was more than loud enough for me to hear half-a-dozen f-bombs that questioned my manhood, the legality of my parent’s marriage, and something I didn’t quite catch about a bow-legged goat.

When I held the door open for him, he wore an expression of pure fury on his face. Bridget scurried out of the way, and I led Craig to Sakura’s office. But like a beaten dog, he followed with his head hung low.

I held Sakura’s office door open for him, as well, and closed it once we were both inside, much to the chagrin of everyone in the office. Bridget’s nervous look and Craig’s furious scowl drew everyone’s attention in the otherwise boring course of day-to-day affairs.

“So, Craig,” Sakura said, prim and proper with her glasses square on her brow and her lips drawn tight. Gone was the playful and friendly look she’d shared with me. This was a serious businesswoman, ready to tackle a serious task. “I’ve gotten several reports of troubling behavior from you.”

Craig snorted. "Save me the bullshit, Sakura. Your dad owes my dad, that's why I got this job. And what's he still doing here?" He jerked his chin at me.

"To make sure you don't do anything even more stupid," I said.

Craig scowled, then turned to Sakura. "Tell him to get lost or to go fetch you a cup of coffee, like that stupid intern forgot to do."

"Craig, you're not in any position to be making demands," Sakura said as she closed her laptop and pushed it aside. "You've been passed off from department to department for way too long. I'm going to break the cycle. You're finished here."

"What?" For the first time, Craig looked surprised.

"You're fired. Pack your things and be out of here before the hour's up. Your employment here is terminated, effective immediately."

"You can't just fire someone without reason!"

"Actually," Sakura smirked, "I can. You're employed at will. At my will, specifically. And I *will* it that you no longer work here."

"I'll get a lawyer," Craig threatened. "You'll be out on your ass, and your daddy's company will have to write me a fat check for wrongful termination."

“Hmm... wrongful termination, you say? How is it wrongful termination when I’ve got records of multiple accounts of sexual harassment from female coworkers, and two reports of violence from your male coworkers? And I bet if I asked, I’m pretty sure a few of your fellow employees would have things to add that aren't already on the record.”

“I want to speak to your father,” Craig said.

“Why? Is speaking to the ‘slut in charge’ not enough for you?” She narrowed her eyes at the man.

For the first time, Craig’s face paled. Sakura had been listening to our conversation out in the hall.

“Look... uhh... being a slut isn’t... all bad. I meant it as a compliment, really. It means--“

Sakura held up her hand to shut him up. “Just get out.”

Craig turned, threw me a look that could kill, and then stormed out of Sakura’s office.

As soon as the door locked, Sakura dropped the fierce look and she sagged into her chair. “Whew. That was a scary one. I thought he was going to tear up my office for sure.”

“You did great. High five!” I congratulated her. I bet a lot of people in the office were going to be doing that soon.

But before we could celebrate, a message lit up before my face. The text glowed, surrounded by a blue box that filled my vision. No matter how I turned, I couldn't see anything except the message.

Welcome to the multiverse.

Initializing... this process may induce some discomfort.

I couldn't even begin to describe the agony I experienced next. 'Some discomfort' was a damn lie. My body was torn apart, scanned, and put back together again. The sensation was like nothing I'd ever felt before, and through all the unnatural pain I was nothing more than a disembodied ghost.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't do anything except focus on the pain. I felt this agony down to my very soul.

I wanted to wave my arms and legs, but they wouldn't move. I couldn't feel my heartbeat or my breathing; it felt like every little function of life had simply disappeared. I didn't know how long I spent in that ghost-like unliving state, but when I finally came to my senses I was somewhere else entirely.

The room I found myself in was completely white and featureless. Light emanated equally from all directions, and there were no shadows anywhere to be found. I was naked as I floated in this formless void, unable to touch, to see, or to feel anything. Was this the afterlife? Had I died?

Suddenly, a weight sprouted into existence on a thin leather cord strung around my

neck. I looked down, but I already knew what it was. It was the token Myrina had given me. The token that was my warning of the apocalypse to come.

My form solidified, and I dropped to the ground. The floor was spongy, sort of what I thought walking on a cloud might feel like.

“Hello?” I called out, “is anyone there?”

“Welcome, Carter Smith of Earth.” The voice echoed across this white space in all directions. The strange timber was both soothing and unsettling. Like the light, the sound came from all directions at once.

The voice that spoke was somehow completely androgynous—both male and female, its gender completely indiscernible. It had a sense of absolute certainty that I might expect from an otherworldly being, someone with knowledge of things far beyond my comprehension.

Had I not received Myrina's warning, I might have thought I was standing before capital 'G' God—though this was no heaven I'd ever heard of. “Am I alive?” I asked.

“You have survived integration, and your mind and body will remain intact,” the voice replied.

“Integration? Is that what that message was about?” I asked.

“Yes. Welcome to the Multiverse.”

“The multiverse?”

“The multiverse is a term used to describe the many universes that exist within the greater universe,” the voice continued. “Some believe they are merely different manifestations of reality, while others consider them separate realities altogether. To us, however, such distinctions are meaningless. You have been integrated into the Arcadia Multiverse, and all realms within its bounds can be freely accessed by those with the power to do so.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I bit my tongue. The silence between us stretched. As far as I could tell, there was absolutely nothing in this place—nothing but space, a space that stretched on forever until it reached infinity.

The silence got to me. “What about the people who didn’t survive integration? What happens to them?” I finally asked.

“Their minds, bodies, and souls will be disassembled and recycled to create unique monsters to challenge those who did survive.” The voice was as cold and as clinical as before, even when talking about tearing people to pieces and recycling them as monsters.

The plain speech sent a chill down my spine. If I’d suspected this was not heaven before, now I knew for certain.

“This is the apocalypse Myrina talked about, isn’t it? The System Apocalypse. That’s you, isn’t it? The system?”

“Yes,” the system replied.

“How do I... stop this?” I felt the resignation creeping into my voice before I even finished speaking.

“You cannot stop the inevitable,” the system replied, its voice as unfeeling as a machine. “Your integration into the system was anticipated sixty-five million years ago.”

I felt my heart sink. “When the dinosaurs were wiped out...” Untold generations and thousands of years of human advancement just turned out to be us ignorant humans playing into this thing’s hands.

“Yes, to make room for sentient life,” the system explained. “Your people are the result of a cosmic genesis seed created to bring about your existence through natural evolution. Your integration is merely the natural progression of events, as planned.”

“Fuck...” There really was nothing I could do for Earth. The apocalypse had come and had likely claimed everything I ever knew with it.

“Affirmative. There was a considerable amount of coitus, copulation, mating, and fucking involved. Your planetary population and pre-integration achievements exceed those of most newly integrated worlds by more than 1000%. Congratulations.”

I had to laugh at that. For a genocidal, all-powerful voice capable of manipulating the destinies of entire planets, the system had a half-decent sense of humor. Assuming it intended that to be a joke.

“Alright, system... What am I here to do?”

Besides wiping out a good portion of the planet, the reason for the system presenting itself to those of us who survived its integration was rather simple. It had brought me here to confirm that the new reality I was about to experience wasn't just a dream. And it wasn't going to end. This was what life would be, from now on, and I had to adapt.

I wasn't sure if it was messing with my thinking, but I felt that realization settle into place like it had always been there. Our conversation hadn't been a long one, but I somehow knew it was the most important one I ever had.

"So, do I select a class or something?" I asked.

"Classes will become available to those who survive to reach level 10," the system replied.

I winced at that fact. Though the system had given no indication of malice, I couldn't help but feel that it didn't expect most people to reach that milestone. Maybe it figured those who couldn't do so weren't worth bothering with.

"Okay, how about some tips?" I asked hopefully.

“Utilize all resources and available methods to ensure survival and prosperity,” the system replied, “favor independence and self-reliance over security.”

I was surprised to get anything out of the system. It felt like it had the cold dispassionate disposition of a machine. But it seemed like asking the right questions could win me some vaguely helpful advice. "So, I should be willing to do whatever it takes and only rely on myself. Sounds rather ruthless, doesn't it?"

"Statistical analysis suggests that the path to true power in the multiverse is a long, difficult, and lonely road."

"What if I want to bring someone along with me?"

"Methods can be provided for the strong to elevate the weak," the system acknowledged, "or to allow them to catch up in levels."

I nodded. "I see... so if I want others to survive, it's possible to take them under my wing."

I promised myself then and there that I would help others out if I could, even if this magical voice told me not to. I wouldn't sacrifice myself for these others, but being willing to lend a helping hand to those in need was part of being human. "Alright, next question... What's going to happen after this?"

"You will be returned to your physical body on the remains of Earth. Your objective will be to survive the disassembly of your planet."

Disassembly of the planet? That didn't sound good.

“Don’t I get a tutorial or something?” I asked.

“All system rewards must be earned,” the system replied, “including tutorials.”

“Damn. I guess I don’t get anything for free,” I muttered.

“Nothing is given for free,” it agreed.

But the system turned out to have something for me, after all.

“As a reward for surviving the integration of a world, you have been given several unique titles and boons. These will prepare you for survival in the multiverse and mitigate the disadvantages of not growing up within it.”

“Sweet! How do I view them?” This was my first bit of good news I’d heard, so I leaped on it eagerly.

At my question, a screen appeared before my eyes.

Title: Forerunner of Earth (Legendary)

You were present when the planet Earth was integrated into the multiverse and have been granted the permanent title Forerunner of Earth. Your success or failure will determine the future of your world.

All experience rewards round upward in your favor.

Universal Translator unlocked for all humans of Earth. Your species, and those adopted by it, shall speak with one voice to determine the future of your world, should you survive the integration.

For lords of your world, should you survive until then, this ability will be upgraded to include all humanoid races of the Arcadia Multiverse.

Title: Integration Survivor (Legendary)

Your body survived the integration process, restoring you to full health and preparing you for the apocalypse. You have been granted the permanent title of Integration Survivor.

You will retain the species designation: "Human (Earth)"

Rare skills and titles will be easier to obtain until full integration is complete.

**Temporary Title: Blessed of the System
(Unique Temporary Title. Expires in 3 days.)**

As a survivor of the integration process, you have been given this temporary boon to assist in your survival.

All disabilities and physical impairments will be healed. All sicknesses will be cured. Age-related debuffs will be removed.

All experience rewards will be tripled while this title is active.

You will receive skill books upon reaching stat point milestones.

+1 stat point in all stats for every four hours you survive.

Wow... that was actually better than I expected. I had thought the infirm and elderly would be dead in an apocalypse, for sure, but it seemed like the system had other plans. In one line, it cured disabilities, sickness, and aging. Millions of humans who would otherwise not have stood a chance in this apocalypse had suddenly been granted a new lease on life.

And on top of that, everyone who survived as long as the title lasted would have an additional eighteen stat points across the board. I didn't know how much a stat point was worth, but it looked like getting those bonus points would triple my current totals.

Carter Smith (Human, Level 1. Rank F)

Strength: 5

Agility: 3

Perception: 4

Vitality: 3

Intelligence: 7

Willpower: 6

I asked about each of the stats, but there were no surprises. They all seemed to do just about what I expected from my gaming experience. I was pretty sure that wasn't without accident.

“Okay, quickly explain what my stats do, please.” Some of them seemed to match what I would expect from a video game, but I wanted to be sure.

“In general terms, strength represents raw physical might. It is most useful for those fighting as warriors or working in physically demanding crafting professions. Agility was previously known as dexterity in an earlier skill build, and it represents fine motor skills. Assassin’s classes make great use of the agility stat.

“Perception is the combined ability of all senses. Archers are the archetypical perception-focused stat, but all combat classes would do well to have enough points in perception to resist sensory disabling attacks.

“The vitality stat represents the ability to recover from physical damage. For example, a healer class would have high vitality.

“Intelligence has some impact on the user’s ability to recall raw information, but its primary use is reflected in magical workings, both for crafting and for combat. A high intelligence also provides additional raw mana for use in spellcraft. Mage classes make great use of intelligence.

“Willpower, also known as wisdom to some species in the multiverse, defines the ability to guard and control one’s own consciousness. Priests and warlocks require high willpower to invoke the power of creatures greater than themselves while maintaining their own sanity.

“Charisma is representative of the force of the wielder’s personality, and it can influence all non-combat interactions, either positively or negatively. An individual with exceptionally low charisma for their level is unlikely to be tolerated in civilized society, whereas an individual with high charisma for their level will find themselves floating to the top regardless of what they do. Charisma thresholds can serve as a prerequisite for leadership classes, such as general or king.

“And lastly, luck enhances the probability of successfully avoiding danger, perceiving hidden threats, and generally tilting the odds ever so slightly in your favor. Luck is favored by con artists and treasure hunters.”

From the sound of things, each stat had a class that focused on it. I suspected there were other classes that might use two or more—though those classes had the clear disadvantage of needing to split your focus between two stats.

The system did have something interesting to say, though, when I asked about why I seemed to lack both a charisma and a luck stat.

"Specialty stats like charisma or luck can be unlocked by obtaining special classes or abilities," the system explained.

"Any hint to what those classes or abilities might be?" I asked.

The system remained silent until I found another question to ask it.

“What does ‘Rank F’ stand for?”

“There are thresholds where gaining a new level is many times more difficult than normal, and the power granted for crossing that threshold is also many times more difficult. These are called grades, ranks, or bottlenecks. Colloquially, F-Rank has been most commonly titled the ‘Fodder’ rank because it is usually only seen on the weakest of creatures suitable for training children to fight.”

“Gee, thanks. So I’m just fodder. What about what comes after it?”

“At level 10, you will be given the option of performing a quest to achieve E-rank. Upon completion, your stats will increase dramatically, as will your class options. E-rank is considered the standard rank for an individual of modest means and status in the multiverse, as well as most ordinary non-sentient monsters.”

“And let me guess, E-rank is colloquially known as ‘Embarrassment to your Family’, if you come from a larger force.”

“Incorrect. The colloquial title for E-Rankers is ‘Everyone’s Bitch’.”

“Fantastic...” I grumbled. It seemed like I was going to need to level sooner rather than later.

“Integration initialization is nearly finished. Yours is completed, but others require more extensive analysis. You have two minutes until estimated task completion. Be sure to

ask any remaining questions in that time.”

“Shit! Don’t I get to choose a class or something?”

“Class availability will be awarded based on performance when the temporary Blessed of the System title expires, or by attending tutorials,” the system explained. “You will be awarded a class. However, classes within integrated space can be changed, so do not worry if you find yourself on a path not ideally suited for you. Your primary objective should be to survive and adapt to your new world.”

“What about starter equipment? Can I get a sword? A bow? A handgun?” I asked.

“You must improvise your initial weapons from your own surroundings.”

I cursed again. “Well, what can I get?”

“No further information will be provided from this unique event. Your mind has been deemed sufficiently pliable to adapt to the multiverse without further tampering, due to previous realizations.”

My eyes went to the only thing I was wearing. Myrina’s token. “So, she’s part of the multiverse...” I wasn’t really asking a question, but the system confirmed it anyway.

“Yes. Myrina of the Ironfallen Clan of Amazonian Warriors has offered you a patronage token. Completing its activation quest will provide you with certain boons, including a system integration tutorial hosted by the Amazonian Empire, along with level-appropriate starter gear and instant unlocks for classes suited for the empire’s

needs,” the system replied.

I suddenly realized something. “This tutorial, would it happen to take place in the Amazonian Empire?”

“You will be temporarily relocated to the Amazonian Empire under certain provisions that will ensure your survival, before returning you to your integration location.”

“But... I could look for someone from the Amazonian Empire, couldn't I?” I pressed.

“Yes.”

Well, how about that? Maybe I'd get to see Myrina again sooner than I thought. But until then, I had an apocalypse to survive.

“Integration initialization has been completed. You will now be returned to your former location on Earth,” the system said.

And before I could either thank it for the words of wisdom, or curse it for destroying my planet, the room around me vanished.

I opened my eyes, and it was like I'd never left Sakura's office. I stood just where I had before, in the same position I'd been in.

I saw Sakura nearby. She sat in her chair just as before. Only now, her eyes had a distant, vacant look to them. She looked like she had been somewhere far distant, and

only now was her conscious mind returning to her body. I was pretty sure I wasn't being figurative here; she had probably just finished her own conversation with the System.

She blinked, and I knew she was back.

"Huh? What... I'm..." her voice trailed off, unsure what to say.

If her experience was anything like mine, she'd just experienced an incredibly painful and confusing conversation with an all-powerful voice in an empty white space.

"It's okay, Sakura. We're back on Earth."

As she looked down at herself, Sakura yelped, and I immediately realized her concern. She was completely naked. Whatever the System had done to us had taken us right out of our clothes and into that special space. Unfortunately, it hadn't been kind enough to put us back in our clothes afterward—meaning we were both naked.

"Don't look!" Sakura blushed as she covered her chest. Her eyes darted away from me in embarrassment, and I turned my head to look elsewhere.

She got dressed, as did I, both of us with our backs turned to the other. But as I did so, I noticed something moving in the corner of Sakura's desk. I got the distinct impression that we weren't alone in her office.

My head whipped around to investigate, and Sakura yelped, still holding her dress pants in her hands. "No peeking!"

I heard something whirring, like motors spinning. The sound was familiar enough for me to instantly realize it was her printer buzzing to life. “Were you printing something?” I asked, regarding the device with suspicion.

Printers were evil, uncooperative, and frustrating things to work with on ordinary days. But at the end of the world? What could it be? The printer split in half, revealing a maw of teeth made of broken plastic shards, each dripping with ink instead of saliva. It launched itself at Sakura, and the only things she had in her hands to defend herself with, were the clothes she’d been in the middle of putting back on.

Sakura screamed, falling backward and barely snatching her hands back in time to save her fingers. The printer only got a mouthful of cloth for its sneaky ambush. Naked and terrified, Sakura tripped over her own chair and fell to the ground, where the snarling printer spat ink that splattered across her skin. She held up her hands to shield her face, and I knew it would be on top of her in another moment.

“Carter!” Sakura screamed.

I flipped Sakura’s desk over, sending the printer tumbling away from her. It reared its monstrous head, but I grabbed the table by its leg and pushed. Then, throwing my full weight behind the table, I slammed the furniture into the printer, driving it all the way into the far wall.

The printer spat and snarled, but took heavy damage from the desk slamming into it. I pulled the desk back and slammed it into the printer again and then again once more. Each hit sent sparks flying through the air, and when the whirring finally stopped, I figured I had finally killed the thing.

You have slain [Mimic - Level 3]

You have been awarded bonus experience for killing an enemy above your own level.

Congratulations! For slaying a monster in order to save a damsel in distress, you have been awarded the title Valiant Protector! +1% combat stat effectiveness when defending beautiful women. Because you are the first of your integration to achieve this title, its effects are enhanced tenfold. Your title will be upgraded to Gallant Guardian.

You have gained the proficiency: Improvised weapons!

“Gallant, huh?” I huffed.

It sounded like a positive title, so I supposed I should be happy about getting it. The annoying thing was having all these words floating in front of my face. That would have been distracting if it had happened a moment ago, when I was still fighting the printer. Just when I was thinking how annoying it was to have these messages block my vision, they shifted off to the bottom left corner.

“Sakura, are you okay?” I asked after I finished dismissing the message.

“I... I have a quest from the System,” Sakura said, eyes unfocused as she stared at a message just like the one I’d dismissed a moment ago. “It’s telling me to... I suppose it’s

easier to just complete the quest.”

Sakura sprang to her feet and pressed her lips against my cheek. It was brief, but the moment she was done, I received another message.

You have successfully saved Sakura Miyamoto from danger! She has recognized your efforts, and you have earned bonus experience points and a temporary title.

You have been awarded the temporary title: Hero of Sakura Miyamoto (Common - Expires in 3 days)

Effects: Enhances combat stats when near Sakura Miyamoto. Effects stack with Gallant Guardian. +1 Charisma (Hidden Stat)

Congratulations! You have reached level 2!

Stat points assigned. You have earned additional stat points which you may manually distribute. If you do not distribute stats within twenty-four hours, they will be randomly distributed.

“Huh... Apparently, I have a title now. I’m the Damsel of Carter Smith.” Sakura blushed as she held her hand up in front of her face, apparently fiddling with her menu.

“Sounds a bit romantic, kind of like my new title.” I chuckled.

Sakura looked at me askance, and I explained the first title I'd gotten—though I didn't think I'd looked particularly gallant smacking a cheap piece of office furniture against a printer-turned monster.

The two of us shared a laugh, which did a lot to break the tension of the life-and-death experience we'd had with the mimic mere moments ago. Sakura tried picking up her discarded shirt, which was stained with printer ink and torn to shreds. Her pants, unfortunately, were still in the maw of the printer, and even though it looked like it was dead, neither of us wanted to approach the thing to check.

While she fussed with the remains of her clothes, I finished dressing and looked at my status menu.

Besides the one additional point in charisma, I had four free points to allocate. Staring at the menu, I wasn't really sure what I should do. If I had a class, the choice would have been obvious. I would have just thrown the points into whatever stat my class was based on. The problem was, I didn't have a class... yet.

That meant I would have to choose how best to allocate my stats. I wished I'd thought to ask the System which stat would yield the greatest results at the early levels. All I could do was guess what the stats might improve.

Thinking about it, I realized that this decision might be a bit easier if I was a little smarter. Which meant the smart choice was probably to put at least one point into intelligence. Besides, I was a little miffed that my intelligence stat wasn't higher. Sure, seven was probably decent, but it wasn't great. Thankfully, I could rectify that now.

I dropped two points into intelligence and waited for a rush of knowledge to fill my head.

A few seconds later, I was still waiting. My thoughts didn't come faster, nor did a miraculous change of personality transform me into someone smart enough to survive this apocalypse.

I did, however, come to the realization that I probably should have dropped those points into perception or vitality. Both of those seemed to be survival stats, and if I didn't have a class, my objective should be to enhance my survivability long enough to get to the point where I knew enough to assign my stats properly. Having realized this, I put one point each into vitality and perception. At last, I sensed something change.

I'd started wearing my glasses regularly recently, thanks to having a desk job and staring at a computer screen all day. I wasn't wearing them now, but it felt like I was. My eyesight sharpened and Sakura came into perfect focus all the way across the room as she poked the dead printer with a pen, trying to extract the remains of her clothes.

"I fear those aren't going to be in any shape to wear," I cautioned. Sure enough, when Sakura finally extracted the ruined remains of her former garments, she had nothing more than a few strips of cloth stained a garish shade of purple.

Worry furrowed Sakura's brow as she turned to me with her hand still covering her chest, even though she had managed to rescue her bra. "I don't have any other clothes in the office..." she mumbled.

I would be fine in just my undershirt. I stripped my long sleeved button-down off and tossed it to her. It was big enough that—with a belt to fasten it around her waist—it could serve as a tunic, covering her down to her thighs. "That will have to do for now," I told her.

Sakura dressed, and I realized the noises from outside her office were getting louder. Perhaps her printer wasn't the only one that had turned evil—well, more evil than

printers usually were.

Looking at her, I realized there was something different about her. I'd never have admitted it out loud, but Sakura had always been pretty average for a woman. She ate healthy, but was too busy to do any real exercise. She could probably dress herself up if she wanted, but usually she was more worried about looking professional, than highlighting her pretty brown eyes with makeup or doing anything more than pull her hair back in a low ponytail.

That had changed. Her cheekbones were sharper than I remembered, and her muscle tone a little more vibrant than it should be. It was like she'd spent a month on a vigorous diet and exercise regimen.

"Did you just allocate some stat points?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sakura nodded. "This is weird, but it seems like real life has turned into some sort of game. I put everything into strength, since that's always the best stat."

I wasn't sure I agreed with that, but I couldn't deny the results. "May I?" I asked, before reaching to touch her face.

Blushing, she nodded.

I ran my hand along her cheek. She'd definitely changed, though there was something else there I couldn't identify until I ran my fingers across the center of her forehead. There was a tiny bump in the center of her head. I reached out and brushed my fingers across the spot again. Definitely a bump.

"Did you hit your head or something?" I asked as I gently stroked the little bump.

Sakura let out a sharp startled gasp as my hand brushed against her forehead again.

"I... yeah, I think I did hit my head. Or something..." Sakura said. She squirmed in place, rubbing her thighs together.

"I'm sorry. Did it hurt when I touched it?"

"Hurt? No, not really. I think it's just pretty sensitive." Sakura stood back up, touching the bump in the center of her head just as I had. "I'll be okay."

"You're sure?"

Sakura nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine."

I shrugged. I thought about pushing a bit more to make sure this wasn't something like a concussion, but before I could ask, we both heard a loud thump just outside the office door.

"Something's happening outside. They might need our help," I said.

"What if there are more monsters out there?" Sakura asked. "Like the printer thing."

"Mimic," I corrected.

I reached for a leg of Sakura's cheap office desk. It wouldn't be an ideal weapon, but it was the best we could come up with for now.

"How are you so calm about this?" Sakura asked in wonder as I unscrewed the legs to her desk and prepared for battle. "My printer turned into a monster and attacked us! And yet you don't seem scared or surprised at all..."

I was silent a moment, debating what to tell her. Eventually, I found my voice. "I guess you could say I've been preparing for something like this for a long time." Heaving and pulling, I tore one leg free, and then another.

Handing one two-foot-long piece of office furniture to Sakura, I kept the other for myself. "Let's go."

Armed like a proper pair of apocalyptic survivors, I yanked the door wide open and regarded the rest of the office. With my first step, I found my shoes soaked in blood.

One of the accountants lay sprawled out on his stomach, arms spread wide, as he spilled red onto the carpet around him. His head lay lolling to the side, his eyes were closed, and his slack jaw hung slightly agape as he twitched in time with every breath.

A rat the size of a dog took fist-sized bites out of his stomach. When it saw me, it seemed to grin maliciously. Its dark brown fur bristled and ruffled, and it growled low in its throat before leaping forward. Claws extended, it ran straight toward me, leaving bloody tracks behind it as it charged.

In response, I readied my club. Turning my back on this thing would be the last thing I ever did.

“Sakura, back me up!” I yelled.

[Giant Rat - Level 3]

Like the mimic, this rat was at a higher level than I was. But I was armed, and hopefully, between the both of us, we should be able to overcome the level disadvantage.

“O-okay!” Sakura said, quickly stepping up to my side, her own desk leg in hand.

I charged forward to meet its attack. With the pointed broken end of my desk leg held out in front of me, I intercepted its hungry lunge with the splintered end of the desk leg.

The rat’s jaws locked onto my weapon and tore it from my grasp. I was worried I was going to be next on the menu, but Sakura darted forward and bashed the rat in the head with her own weapon. That dazed the creature long enough for me to tear my weapon free from its jaws, snapping some rat teeth as I jerked it back.

The rat righted itself in moments, turning its attention to Sakura. She hesitated when she locked eyes with the beast, her entire body freezing up. She’d been about to hit it again, but staring at those monstrous eyes, she couldn’t move a muscle.

The rat’s threatening posture as it focused on her had the opposite effect on me. I felt Gallant Guardian take effect, and new strength flowed into my body. I swung the broken desk leg at the rat’s head, the wood connecting solidly with its skull.

My strike broke the skin and drew a line of bright red along the monstrous rodent's temple. It roared in pain and backed away, shaking its head violently as it retreated. As soon as it scurried past Sakura, it fled into the hallway beyond.

Your Improvised Weapons proficiency has increased to 2.

"You did it!" Sakura congratulated me.

I grimaced. I'd hoped to put the rat down. I bet that would have granted us a good amount of experience points. And it didn't look like we were in time to save the accountant—I think his name had been Tim. His eyes gazed out blankly into nothing as his heart pumped out the last of his blood onto the carpet. His body lay still and unmoving.

Sakura followed my gaze, and her face paled. "I... I think I loaned the law office across the hall our first aid kit. Let me go get it!"

I shook my head. "There's nothing we can do for him. Come on. And stick close. There might be others who need help."

With a nod, Sakura caught back up to me. I saw several piles of clothes sitting beside desks as we passed. While there was a chance those people had simply abandoned their clothes when they returned from meeting with the system, in my heart I knew that another explanation was more likely.

The System had mentioned that many people would be incompatible with integration, and that those incompatible people would find their minds and bodies repurposed. Had

that giant rat once been someone I knew? I wondered if it was Karen, the office gossip—she'd always had a bit of a pinched rat-faced look about her.

A comical but welcome change to those grim thoughts came when I saw another of my coworkers, Frank. One of our software engineers, he always seemed to be exhausted. Still, once he got some coffee in his system, he was good for about two to three hours of intense focus. And at the moment, his focus was so intense, that he hadn't even realized his clothes were lying in a pile on the ground next to him.

He stared at his computer screen with a frown on his face.

“Frank!” I shouted at him.

“Carter, tell Sakura the internet is down again... how am I supposed to work without access to Stack Overflow?” Frank grumbled.

“Frank, you have more important things to worry about!”

Frank groaned, pressing his palms to his eyes. “I told Sakura, I'm still working on it. We don't need to hold another meeting.”

At this point, Sakura spoke up. “Frank, you're naked. Get dressed.”

Sakura's voice finally broke Frank's concentration, especially when he looked down and realized she was right.

“Crap! I swear I don’t know how that happened!” Frank jumped to his feet, then promptly covered himself. “Just don’t call the cops. You know how hard it is to find work if you get put on one of those sex offender registers...”

“Frank, it’s the apocalypse. The cops are the least of your worries,” I said. “Put your pants back on and grab a weapon.”

“Wait... you mean all that crap about the apocalypse was real?” Frank asked in surprise as he hopped on one leg, pulling one pants leg up. “I thought I fell asleep at my desk and had another one of those weird-ass dreams again...”

“You didn’t feel the excruciating pain?” I asked.

“You’ve been sleeping on the job?” Sakura asked.

Frank shrugged at both our questions. “I just figured I needed to finish my coffee faster.”

I shook my head as I helped Frank arm himself. The guy needed to learn the value of keeping a proper sleep schedule. I handed my club off to him as we reached my desk. Tearing through the drawers, I found my pocketknife.

It was a handy little thing, and unlike most lock-blades, the edge on this one was a full five inches long—about as long as my hand—with a reinforced spine. I claimed it was for opening boxes, but really it was for if the apocalypse Myrina had warned me of ever came while I was in the office. Now that it had, I found myself wishing I’d prepared more toys like this. As it was, most of my supplies were either at home or in my little emergency shelter.

I opened the janitor's closet nearby, found a mop, tore the head off, and then split the shaft with my blade before lashing the pocketknife to the mop head with the braided rope of the mop to create a makeshift spear. Thanks to having practiced doing this before, the process only took a minute.

"You seem like you've done that before, Carter." Frank opened one eye almost all the way, which was about as close as the sleepy programmer came to arching an eyebrow.

I shrugged. "I've watched a few YouTube videos here and there."

We spent the next few minutes scouting for more survivors and stabbing printers. None of the others moved like the first one had, but I argued that you could never be certain, and it would be best to finish them off before they turned on us.

Sakura's company owned the entire building, but we only used this one floor. I was sad to see that out of more than thirty coworkers, less than half remained. The rest had never returned after their encounter with the System. I'd been mentally bracing myself for this day since Myrina warned me of it, but the loss still hurt.

I would just have to save as many as I could.

We found most of the survivors huddled in the break room. The moment that giant rat appeared, they'd scattered like mice.

The first to greet me was the intern I'd saved from Craig. A smile spread across her face the moment she saw me. And on such a pretty girl, it was quite a sight to see.

“Carter! You’re alright. I’m glad,” Bridget said. She ran her hand through her shoulder length golden hair and peered up at me through her lashes.

“He’s fine. And so am I, by the way,” Sakura said as she wrapped an arm around my waist. Did I sense a hint of possessiveness from her?

Bridget replied with a pleasant smile. “I’m glad to see you’re alright as well, Miss Miyamoto.”

“So, did everyone in the office take cover in here?” I asked. There were nods all around.

“Everyone who reappeared, we were just talking about this System thing and what it means,” Bridget said. “It almost feels like we’re in a video game.”

“Is... is the monster gone?” one man asked. His hair was slicked back, and he wore a fine suit. He was probably from the law office next door. I was pretty sure I’d seen him hitting on our receptionist a few times, which was probably what he was doing when this whole thing started.

“For now,” I replied. “It’s probably still in the building.”

“Oh god...” Stacy from accounting gasped. I didn't know her well, but she'd been working in this office since before I'd joined up. “Did you see what it did to Tim? Is he still alive?”

I shook my head. “I saw, and no. He’s not.”

“When are the police going to get here?” the lawyer asked. “Was anyone able to get through to them? I can’t get a signal for my cell phone in here.”

Strangely enough, I hadn’t even thought to call the police. In fact, the idea that I could call for help hadn’t even crossed my mind. I’d been fully prepared to survive on my own wit and skill.

Sakura must have thought of it, though, because she shook her head. “I can’t get a signal anywhere in the building. The internet is down, as well. We might be able to try a landline if we can find one. I know where the outlet is, but the actual phones were ripped out years ago.”

“I know where one is!” the lawyer said, “and a phone, too. Our law office still has one for when people call the desk. But to use it, we have to leave the safety of this room and face the monsters...”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” I asked.

“Maybe one of us could go out and make the phone call, while the rest of us stay here...” the lawyer suggested. “For backup, I mean. If you get attacked, you’ll want someone still alive to recover your body.”

There were a bunch of nods of agreement all around. I pinched the bridge of my nose, then I put my foot down.

“No. Listen up.” I jammed the butt of my spear into the ground for emphasis. “We are going out there and fighting our way to the telephone, one way or another! You all went

through the same thing I did. You all met the System, didn't you?"

I saw most people start nodding.

"Did any of you get the impression that this was an isolated event that would happen only to our office? No. It told me that this was a planet-wide integration, meaning those monsters are everywhere. If the cops are even still around, I'm sure they've got their own problems to deal with. Odds are, we are going to be on our own—even if we manage to get in contact with anyone... And that's a big if."

Silence all around. I hoped it was because my words rang true.

"Okay, okay... I get it," the lawyer said. "We'll follow you out,"

"Yeah. I trust Carter to lead us to safety," Bridget stared at me with adoring eyes.

On my other side, I saw Sakura cross her arms and take a step closer to me.

Congratulations! You have been appointed party leader!

For leading a party of eighteen fellow humans, you have been awarded the leadership title: Lieutenant (Common)

Effects: +4 charisma (Hidden stat) when leading a party.

You have unlocked a Stat Quest!

Charisma Unleashed - Your charisma stat is hidden and is currently not affected by bonuses or modifiers. To gain full access to the Charisma stat, you must unlock it!

Objective: Reach 10 Charisma

Beware: If you fail to reach 10 Charisma before this quest expires in three days, you will receive a permanent charisma debuff, and the stat will remain hidden.

Warning: Your interactions while improving your charisma score will determine the nature of the bonuses your Charisma stat provides, as well as the skill books your unique title [Blessed of the System] will offer.

Will you accept the quest Charisma Unleashed?

I hovered over the quest prompt for a moment. A permanent charisma debuff sounded like a very bad thing. Normally, I was fairly risk-adverse, but my mind went back to the temporary title I now had. In theory, that buff alone should give me enough charisma to complete the quest before it expired.

Sakura pressed up against me with a smile on her face. "Lead the way, Carter. As branch manager, I officially delegate all the office's military matters to you."

For just a moment, she reminded me of Myrina. My childhood friend would never have second guessed herself when faced with a crisis like this—nor would she have rejected a challenge when one came for her. She was someone who'd survived on a world created by this System, and I vowed I would do the same.

You have accepted the quest: [Charisma Unleashed].

You have three days to reach 10 charisma.

I felt the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders at the same time as a new menu appeared before me. Apparently, becoming a leader was more than just a title or social role when living within the Multiverse. Two new tabs had become available to me.

One displayed the quest I'd just accepted, but the other had to do with the leadership role I'd just been given. In the corner of my vision, I could see a little symbol representing each of the office workers. Beneath their portraits and names were little bars which I could only guess represented their health.

“Sakura, can you see everyone’s portraits on the left-hand side of your vision?” I asked.

Sakura shook her head. “I don’t think so. Maybe I’m not seeing it...”

I shook my head. “Just confirming something.” If the menu had appeared for her the same way it had appeared for me, there was no way she could have missed it.

Bridget came up on my other side. While Sakura stuck to my right side, she claimed my left. “I don’t see it either, Carter.”

Sakura glared at her, but Bridget stared at me with a bright smile on her face.

Warning! Party Cohesion has dropped by 10%!

Your Party Cohesion is now only 20%.

The further this metric falls, the more likely your group is to disband.

That message sounded bad, and I was worried that I'd need to talk to the two of them privately and then give everyone another motivational speech. The trouble was, I didn't think I had one in me. But just when I was starting to worry, someone at the party let out a terrified scream.

Checking the portraits on the left side of my vision, I saw the lawyer had lost a bit of health. I turned to him behind me and saw him hopping on one leg while a cockroach the size of a dinner plate nibbled on his shoe.

I turned in one swift motion, stabbing down with my spear and skewering the cockroach.

You have slain [Cockroach - Level 1]!

"There, it's dead." I tried to calm the lawyer down, but he ducked behind me and pointed to the far corner with a trembling finger. A hoard of things was coming out of the walls.

“Oh god, we’re all going to be eaten by giant bugs!” he screamed.

“Everyone, form a line!” I yelled. “We’ll hold them here!”

Some people froze, while others shakily took a few steps forward.

“Move it! One line in front, one line behind them,” I yelled.

I felt Bridget and Sakura take up positions beside me, as Frank reluctantly backed us up. Following their lead, the others put on brave faces and filled in the lines.

“What Carter said!” Sakura yelled. The office workers still recognized her as their boss, so when she backed me up, the holdouts stepped up.

“They’re just bugs. They are big bugs, but they’re bugs all the same. A good stomp or bash should take care of them.”

That was about all the helpful advice I could provide, because they were on top of us a moment later. The cockroaches didn’t look all that tough, and when I stabbed my second cockroach, I realized they were likely all level one, just like the first one.

You have slain [Cockroach - Level 1]!

I received five more notifications, one after another, all showing I’d killed five level-one cockroaches. Each died to a single spear thrust, so I had little trouble holding my part of the line.

Congratulations! You have reached level 3!

You have four available stat points to assign!

Once I reached level three, the cockroaches stopped coming. It was like they sensed I'd become too powerful for them to attack, and they'd instinctively started looking for easier prey. I used the brief lull in the fight to assign my stat points. I could kill these cockroaches, but what if that rat showed up again?

To increase my survivability a little more, I added one point to perception, one point to agility, one to vitality, and one to strength. Those were all weak stats for me, and I wanted to shore up my weaknesses. The gamer in me wanted to pour all the points into one stat, but I resisted the urge. For one, I wasn't sure which stat to focus on. But beyond that, this wasn't a game.

Neglecting a stat like vitality in favor of putting all my points into agility would seem like a good idea right up until a stray cockroach snuck up on me. One mistake would leave me dead—and the System had mentioned nothing about respawns.

I shoved the specialization question off until later. With my life on the line, it was better to shore up my weaknesses and to avoid death. I would focus on figuring out how to kick ass later.

The effect was immediate. My muscles didn't bulge, but I felt like my white undershirt had gotten a little tighter. I felt like I had a bit of a bounce to my step, like I'd gotten lighter, but the pull of gravity told me the opposite had happened. I was heavier, but had gotten stronger—stronger to the point where I felt like I was lighter.

It was an odd combination of sensations, and I nearly stumbled as I adjusted to my new strength. I righted myself before falling, since that would have put me on the floor where the cockroaches could get me. A few had darted towards me, as if sensing weakness. Since they wanted a piece of me, I gave them a piece of my spear. I skewered three more, and soon the rest of the cockroaches were back to ignoring me.

Everyone else was not as fortunate. Sakura was dealing with three cockroaches, bashing down with her improvised club on any approaching her, but she was the only one really keeping pace with the tide of foot-long insects, besides Frank and myself. From my party leader screen, I could tell she'd leveled up at some point and was now a level two—and it looked like she'd assigned most of her new stat points to strength so she could hit harder and finish the monsters off in one blow.

Frank had my old table leg, but he didn't wield it as aggressively as Sakura did hers. His blows were half-hearted, and while he had probably started with more points in strength than Sakura, he wasn't nearly as decisive at crushing the cockroaches the moment they reared their ugly heads. Fortunately, just having a weapon put him in a better position than most of the others.

Bridget was having a tougher time than Frank, but was holding her own. She had to stomp on the cockroaches, since she didn't have a weapon. Fortunately, the heels she was wearing were remarkably pointy, and they went through a cockroach's exoskeleton almost as easily as my spear tip did.

Everyone else, though, was faltering. While a stomp could kill the bugs, most people had a hard time throwing their weight behind the attack. An hour ago we'd been a bunch of out-of-shape office workers; it seems nobody here had the mentality for battle. The cockroaches were starting to get past our front line, especially off in the corners where they were beyond the reach of my spear or Sakura's makeshift club.

Several people now had bugs crawling up their pant legs and taking bites out of their ankles. A few had realized the giant cockroaches were weak enough that they could just

tear them free with their hands and toss them aside, but some folks merely shook their legs in a combination of fear and horror, trying to shake the giant bugs loose.

“Rear line, pull back and help those with bugs on them deal with those things!” I shouted.

I soon realized I would have to step things up a notch. Our best fighters would have to cover for those who didn't yet have the right mentality to survive on their own. “Sakura, Bridget, Frank, spread out!” I shouted, and the three I'd named spread out to cover the entire front line, with me holding more than a third of the line. My spear had the longest reach and, as of now, I had the highest level of the group, so it was only natural that I covered the biggest opening.

I hacked and slashed, unable to give further orders as I taxed my body to its limit, darting back and forth, skewering cockroaches. My biggest problem was the need to scrape stuck cockroaches off my spear point. They were big enough that when I skewered one, only a bit of my knife's tip poked through their underside. That meant every time one got stuck, I had to kick it off my spear. Fortunately, my lashings and knots held firm, but every second I had to clear my spear off was another second I wasn't skewering cockroaches.

Thankfully, our rear line was coming together again after dealing with the cockroaches that had bitten a few of our front liners, and as adrenaline replaced years of easy living, my fellow office workers started to fight back.

There was something about the simple routine of mundane life that made people hold back. You never needed your full strength or speed hunched over a desk all day, pressing keys. But those long-dormant primal powers were still there, lurking beneath the surface for a day like today.

Slowly, I sensed those behind me start to lash out. Good. That was what they'd need to do to survive.

Bridget finally leveled up, and I covered her for a moment while she distributed her stats. When she started fighting again, she was visibly faster and struck with greater force than before.

Around my twentieth cockroach kill, the creatures started changing their behavior around me. Before, they'd merely been avoiding me, but after slaying so many, they started fleeing me altogether.

You've unlocked the title: Roachbane!

You have slain dozens of Cockroaches. All such monsters sense your many kills and know to fear you. They will avoid you whenever possible. You deal bonus damage to cockroaches and other creatures of the order Blattodea.

I gave chase, cutting down two more before letting the rest flee when I was certain they weren't coming back.

The lawyer I'd been talking with before climbed to his feet. I realized now he'd been one of the people running around with a cockroach biting his ankle, unable to muster the will to tear the insects free with his hands.

"We did it!" he shouted. "We fought those damn bugs off!" He held up his hand for a high-five, and several people took him up on the offer.

“Yeah, we fought them off. Well done, everyone. And I see a few of you got levels from it, too,” I said, still studying my party leader menu.

I hadn't gotten another level, but just like in a game, I was getting less and less experience from these weaker foes.

“If you haven't already, I recommend allocating those stat points. We'll stay here a bit, then head over to the law office and the landline. In the meantime, arm yourselves. You saw how effective having an impromptu club was for Sakura and Frank. They are nothing more than the legs from an office desk; there are plenty more where those came from.”

I gestured around the room at all the tables. I wanted the entire party to be armed. The more of these things everyone killed, the more levels everyone would gain. And the more levels everyone gained, the safer we'd all be.

Your party is victorious! Your party cohesion has increased to 45%.

We spent a few minutes catching our breath. I didn't like how everyone else reacted to the declaration of a break. They slumped to the floor in exhaustion or started talking loudly about the fight.

Sakura must have been thinking the same thing I was because she shushed the loudest of the bunch. “Do you want to attract more monsters?” she asked.

The loud talkers paled and started speaking in hushed whispers.

Using the party leader menu, I watched for the last person who had leveled up to assign their stat points. Once that was taken care of, I got everyone up, and we headed across the hall into the law office.

“Anybody who’s got a high perception, keep lookout,” I ordered.

“What’s a high perception?” one of the office workers asked.

“If this is like a game, five should be close to average, and ten should be the limits of normal human capability. So, anyone close to ten should be a lookout. I’m only at eight, so I’ll stay in the middle and leave the rest to you guys,” the lawyer told the others.

After quickly comparing perception stats, the lawyer with his ‘only’ eight perception turned out to be the highest among us. He grumbled when I ordered him to the back of our formation to keep a watch behind us, but he did so without much of an audible complaint.

Ahead of us, there were neither cockroaches nor giant rats. The hallway was quiet. The law office was just on the other side of the building, on the same floor. We had to cross the stairwell, but not go up or down it. Really, it was only twenty paces, but each footfall sent an echo running up and down the stairs. The brief walk had never felt so eerie in all my time working here.

“There’s the phone!” the lawyer pointed into the law office. “It’s just behind that desk there.”

I nodded. I checked the room to make sure it was clear and noticed one printer was

running. The whirring seemed slightly out of place, and the way the gears ground together sounded unnatural. My mind went back to the printer in Sakura's office. Without a moment of hesitation, I thrust my spear into it, and ink spilled everywhere like blood gushing from a wound.

You have slain [Mimic - Level 2]!

That marked another one of those damn machines that was secretly a monster. I waved to the others. "It looks clear! Come on."

We all huddled around the landline, which Sakura picked up. She held it to her ear and waited.

"Well, is it working?" the lawyer asked hopefully.

The others looked on with equally fervent expectation.

Sakura answered by punching in three numbers and putting the phone on speaker. A moment later, someone on the other side answered. "This is nine-one-one." The phone said.

"Oh thank god, the police!" the lawyer shouted for joy. "We need a swat team here as soon as possible! There are giant monsters in the office! Huge rats and giant bugs!"

I frowned. Weren't the cops supposed to ask, 'what is your emergency?' And were those gunshots I heard in the background? A moment later, I heard something akin to a door being barricaded.

“What’s the situation look like outside, citizen?” the voice on the other end of the line asked.

“Monsters! Giant monsters everywhere!” someone else shouted. “If you don’t come to rescue us, we’re all going to die!”

The dispatcher on the other end was silent for a moment. “The same as it is everywhere else, then. What is your location? I will add you to the rescue list.”

“Rescue list?” The lawyer frowned. “We need a SWAT team here, now!”

“The precinct is currently under attack and we cannot leave,” the dispatcher replied. “Most of our armory is nonfunctional. You’ll have to figure out how to survive on your own until we can break out... but keep in touch. We’re building a map of Crownhill to mark out the worst of the disaster zones.”

“Understood. We’ll keep in touch,” I said.

In the background, I heard a loud *crash* and a few frightened shouts, then the line abruptly went quiet. Whatever was happening at the station, it was even worse there than it was here.

“Well, you heard it, folks. There will be no rescue coming.” I looked around at the frightened crowd. “And that means we have to rescue ourselves.”

Considering the situation, it was a miracle the phone line had worked at all. But just knowing there were other people out there was a huge relief—at least that was the point Bridget argued. Everyone else was less enthusiastic.

“But, just to confirm,” Frank began, looking at Sakura, “I don’t have to finish that update that I was supposed to push out by noon, right?”

“Well, if the monsters all die, then we can get back to work,” Sakura said. “But until then, everyone is off the clock.”

“What, no pay?” someone groaned.

“I can’t pay you if the computers don’t work!” Sakura scowled and crossed her arms.

“But I just set up direct deposit!” someone groaned.

The arguments about survival turned into arguments about whether or not everyone should get paid during an apocalypse. The familiar back and forth of an office debate was actually somewhat comforting to everyone present—so comforting, that I nearly missed the scrabbling sound of claws on wood coming up the stairwell.

“Be quiet!” I shouted. “Do you hear that?”

Everyone went quiet. In the silence, everyone heard the scrabbling, scraping of claws.

“It’s coming from the stairwell,” Bridget said. I took a step forward, and everyone

besides Sakura and I backed away from the door leading to the stairs.

A familiar monster peeked its head around the door, but this time, it brought friends. Six giant rats stalked into the room, one after another.

“Form a line!” I shouted, with Sakura repeating my order to those who weren’t listening. People picked themselves up off the ground and wiped the tears and fear off their faces. With their improvised weapons in hand, we faced the giant rats.

I had hoped the rats would back off when they saw we were ready to face them, but whatever the System had done had transformed these humble rats into ferocious monsters. They were out for blood, and it would take more than a show of force to scare them off.

I had a theory about why these monsters were attacking us, though. I had gotten stronger by killing those cockroaches and the mimics. It had probably been the same for these monsters. They wanted to farm us for levels. Maybe it was just instinct, or maybe these things were smarter than normal rats. But either way, the System had pitted us against one another.

And I planned to be the one to come out on top.

The lead rat screeched, claws digging into the carpet. I met it with a battle cry of my own, and spear met claw. Its hide was tough, but the point of the knife on the end of my spear was sharp enough to draw blood. Between my forward thrust and the rat’s own charge, it skewered itself on my spear deep enough for it to be a mortal wound.

But it wasn’t dead yet. With claws outstretched, it swiped at me. My spear was stuck in the rat’s ribcage, and I needed to pull it free. Only while I was doing so, another rat

ducked beneath my spear and bit me. I had to drop my weapon and dodge to the side.

Thankfully ,Sakura was there, and she leaped forward with her club in hand. For just a moment, the snarl on my petite boss' face made her look like a feral barbarian warrior as she slammed her table leg down on the rat's head. Dazed by the blow, the rat stumbled.

I tore my spear from the first rat, finished it with a second stab through the eye, and then turned to help Sakura.

You have slain [Giant Rat - Level 4].

You have slain [Giant Rat - Level 3].

Your Improvised Weapons Proficiency has increased to 3.

The first rat had been a little stronger than I'd expected, which explained why it could keep fighting even after being stabbed through the lung. I wished there was a way to see the levels of my opponents before engaging them. For now, all I could do was see how strong they were after the fact, from their kill notifications.

Once again, it was Bridget, Sakura, Frank, and I who did most of the fighting. At least the others were armed this time, but only a few of them were truly willing to throw themselves into battle. Fortunately for them, the four of us could finish the rats. But just when I was thinking we had victory in the bag, a new threat emerged.

The remaining rats limped back in retreat, and our own people hauled back our

wounded behind our own lines. Across from us, I saw a new rat to the rear, approaching behind all the others. It seemed familiar, and when I saw the wound in its side, just like the rat I'd fought before, I realized we were old friends.

That was the exact same wound I'd left on the rat I'd fought. It might have been only twenty minutes or so since that battle, but the rat had grown considerably in the short time. While the other giant rats had been about the size of a dog, this one looked like it was big enough to wrestle a bear. Though I didn't know what level it was, just looking at it, my instincts told me it was far and away more dangerous than the rest of the rats.

If I needed any proof that killing humans made these monsters stronger, the proof was before me now. It seems Tim from accounting's death had just been the start of this creature's journey of slaughter. It had probably killed several others since I'd driven it off, and now it was looking for a rematch.

"Oh god, it's level six!" the lawyer gasped.

"Level six, huh..." I tightened my grip on my spear. This was going to be a tough fight. I wasn't sure how the lawyer knew that, but I'd seen him fiddling with his system messages during the fight.

Sakura stepped up beside me, ready to watch my back. A moment later, Bridget joined her. Then Frank, and after him, all the others who weren't wounded from the first fight stepped up, as well.

Party cohesion has increased to 60%

We rushed towards our foe, humans and beasts meeting in battle. The rat matriarch snarled, baring her fangs with her beady red eyes locked on me. I had my gaze fixed on

her as well, and with my spear in hand, I had no intention of running.

The rats charged forward again, as we did the same. I tried to skewer the rat matriarch the same way I'd gotten her before, by using her charge to drive the spear into herself. But she was wise to that trick, and she swatted the spear aside as she approached.

My weapon turned in my hand, and I held its haft up to shield myself as the rat matriarch's jaws snapped at my neck. Her jaws clamped down on the spear shaft instead of flesh, though, and the wooden mop handle splintered between her teeth.

My makeshift spear gave way. The janitor's mop had never been intended to be used as a weapon, and had certainly never been designed with a monster like this in mind. I had been counting on having the advantage of reach, but now all I held were two broken sticks, one of which had a sharp and pointy end. It would have to do.

With the blunt broken half, I slapped the rat up the side of her head. That was just to distract her, though, because a moment later, I stabbed the end with my pocketknife still attached into the other side of her neck.

The point sank deep, but I paid a price for my success. I was too close to the rat to pull back before it could counterattack, and its claws swept across my chest, cutting through my undershirt and slicing open the flesh beneath.

"Carter!" Sakura yelled, her fear for me evident in her tone.

But she had her own fight to focus on. She swung her club with desperate vigor, smashing aside the rat she was fighting so she could position herself closer to me. The blow wasn't enough to defeat her enemy, though, and a moment later, it was back on its feet and biting her leg.

Instead of letting out a scream of pain, she swept her leg around and slammed the rat clinging to her into the wall. With its head pinched between her heel and solid masonry, a moment later Sakura slammed the table leg with its splintered end into its skull, stabbing right through the rat's eye.

Meanwhile, Bridget and Frank were working together. Frank distracted a rat, while Bridget broke its legs with two steady blows. Once disabled, the beast couldn't avoid either of them as they rained down blow after blow on its head.

The others were winning their fights, too, slowly but surely. I just needed to hold off the rat matriarch a little longer, and they'd all be able to come to my aid. I sensed the rat matriarch's attention drift to the rest of the battle, just as mine had, and I expected it to cut its losses and flee like it had before. But its hatred of me ran deep, and it fought with even greater aggression than before as it tried to finish me before the other rats died.

The spear tip with my knife on the end was still stuck about six inches deep in the rat's neck. There had to be a jugular in there somewhere; if I could slide the blade across it, the rat matriarch would be as good as dead. I kept the truncated spear tip in her while I wailed on the rat's head with the other half. It clawed me again, and we traded blow for blow. It shoved against me, and I shoved back with my spear in its throat, driving the blade deeper and lower.

Blood started flowing, this time far more than before. I was certain I'd scraped across something vital and that it was only a matter of time before the beast went down. Time was on my side.

Then the rat matriarch lunged forward once more, jaws open wide. But this time, a pit opened up deep in my stomach as her teeth suddenly glowed red. I had a terrible feeling about that bite.

I brought my offhand stick up to block. The rat batted my stick aside, but I shoved it with my arm. I knew the rat had been going for my jugular before, but it changed its mind at the last moment as the glow in its teeth subsided. It turned to my right arm, still holding the spear pressed deep into its neck.

It bit down just past my wrist, and I felt excruciating pain flow up my arm.

You have been afflicted with the poison [Toxic Bite]!

Despite the pain and the notification, I twisted my blade in the Matriarch's neck. Blood gushed out the rat's throat in a great flowing river, and I felt its shock that I didn't die the moment it bit me. We shoved against one another, using the last of our strength. This time we were both far weaker than before.

But I was poisoned, and it was not, so it got the better of me this time. The massive rat jumped on top of me, its maw opened wide. With my good left hand, I shoved the broken stick down its throat.

It choked, spluttered, and coughed. In that instant, it finally realized it had run out of time to fight me. I had held out long enough for my allies to defeat its allies. Sakura, Bridget, Frank, and all the others would be coming to my aid soon. When that happened, the rat was as good as dead—no matter how many levels it had.

It turned tail, knocking me aside as it did so. I crashed into one of the few remaining rats. It was one of the rats that Bridget and Frank had disabled, but it wasn't dead yet. When I fell on top of it, I crushed it, finishing it off.

You have slain [Giant Rat - Level 4]

You have defeated a fellow party leader and driven their forces from the field!

Bonus experience points awarded for victory against a party of monsters while leading a party of your own.

You have reached level 4! You have four stat points to assign.

My eyes closed as I watched the Rat Matriarch scurry away to lick her wounds. I knew in my heart that we hadn't seen the last of her.

“Carter!” Sakura called out again, this time freeing herself from the dead rat clinging to her ankle and stumbling over in my direction. The battle might have been won, but it wasn't finished.

There were still a half dozen wounded and snarling rats with sharp teeth and claws biting and slashing at anyone who approached. The risky part, at least, was over. Now, it was just a matter of finishing them off and collecting the experience points.

A rat stood between her and me, and Sakura swept her club around to bash it aside. But just as she was about to make contact, a noise rang out from the stairwell, back towards our office.

Crack!

The first retort sounded almost like a board falling, sharp and quick. But then, when two more rang out, another rat stumbled as bleeding wounds appeared on its body.

Crack! Crack!

Those were gunshots I was hearing, and all eyes turned to the man who made them.

A man in a tactical vest stood with a loaded pistol in his hands, leveled at the last of the rats. He let the magazine in his gun fall to the ground and slammed a new one in place.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three more bullets rang out in quick succession and the last rat died, just like that.

“Who told you pencil pushers to run off on me? You should have stayed safe in your cubicles and waited for security to arrive. And by that, I mean waited for me.”

The man was large and had thrown a tactical vest over his shirt. Each pouch across its front had a spare magazine in it for the pistol he still held in his hand. He wore a venomous smile, especially when he looked over at Sakura and me, seeing that we were both wounded. His finger twitched on his gun.

The man, of course, was Craig.

You have led your party to victory against a fellow party leader!

As a result, you have been awarded the title Raid Captain.

When leading a party, each of your stats receive a boost equivalent to 10% of the average stats of everyone in your party.

I looked up at Craig, and his eyes met mine. I didn't like the look in his eyes. They reminded me too much of the monster I'd just fought. Just like the Rat Matriarch, he wanted revenge.

My arm throbbed, so I assigned one point to vitality. That eased the pain somewhat, but didn't cure my Toxic Bite affliction. Craig was saying something to the others, but I couldn't hear him over the throbbing in my temples.

I needed to think straight and stand. I had three more points to spend. I could dump them all into vitality, but something told me that wouldn't cure the poison, just temporarily abate its effects. Maybe that was just instinct, or maybe I had a reason.

If only I could think clearly, I'd know. Coming to that realization, I put one point into Intelligence.

The pain still hurt as much as before, but reaching ten points in Intelligence felt like crossing a threshold. It was like that one point invested counted far more than those before it. I could think clearly, despite the pain. Don't get me wrong, the pain was still there, but a calculating, analytical part of my mind realized I couldn't do anything about it, and moved past the problem. It felt almost like a superpower.

Sakura and I had been chatting a bit with the others, and we'd made a few guesses at what different thresholds of stats represented. A few suspected that nine was the most anyone could start with in any stat, and might be what an Olympic athlete might get in stats relevant to their category. In contrast, ten stat points represented a single step beyond peak human ability. And now I had ten points in Intelligence. Perhaps this was how humanity's greatest geniuses before the System had felt.

Now that I could think again, I immediately realized I needed to flip through my menus. I was poisoned, and I needed to figure out how it affected me. My stats displayed my total health, equal in points to my vitality. My health was at half of the maximum capacity, and as I watched, the vitality ticked up once, which represented my natural healing. But then the poison took effect.

You are afflicted with the poison [Toxic Bite].

As soon as I had the message, my health points went down by two. My stomach sank in my chest as I felt myself growing weaker and watched my total health decrease. I was dying.

There was only one thing I could do. I needed to boost my vitality enough to at least match the amount of health Toxic Bite was stealing from me. That would keep me from dying—or at least buy me ten more hours to figure this out. So with no other choice, I dumped my two remaining free points into vitality.

The immediate surge of extra health made me feel a lot better. Looking at my stats, my health point total went up proportionally to the health I'd just added. But Toxic Bite was still there, and it would nip at my health every hour or so until it was gone. I would have to check this screen frequently, but something told me the three points I put into the stat wouldn't be enough to heal me of my affliction. I needed more levels or an antidote if I didn't want to die.

With my spear broken and my body poisoned, I couldn't really fight, which meant I couldn't kill. Not being able to kill meant I couldn't level. The conundrum spelled certain death for me, at least until I saw another notification.

Congratulations! Your Intelligence has reached 10.

Your unique temporary title [Blessed of the System] bestows you with special rewards upon achieving a milestone stat to help you on your journey!

You have been awarded an Intelligence skill book!

Choose carefully! The skills you utilize and the feats you perform will reflect the class choices you will be presented with at level 10.

Would you like:

- **Book of Focus (Common) - Allows the user to ignore all distractions for up to one hour.**
- **Book of Illumination (Common) - Consumes mana to generate a glowing light.**
- **Book of Mana Bolt (Common) - Propels a raindrop-shaped bolt of mana at the target, dealing ranged damage proportional to the amount of mana invested in the Mana Bolt.**

There it was. A lifeline.

Ever since that lawyer called out the exact level of the rat I'd fought, I suspected there'd been something important waiting for us when a stat reached ten. And here it was.

I selected Mana Bolt. From the sound of things, it was a spell. I wasn't sure how powerful it was, but if it could kill, it could save my life. I needed to find monsters weak enough to put down and farm before the poison finished me.

You have received the Book of Mana Bolt! Would you like to learn this skill immediately or spawn the skill book?

Mentally, I thought about learning the skill immediately. A sharp pain shot through my head, and I felt something in my mind twitch. There was suddenly a muscle there that I'd never used before.

Finally able to focus, I turned my attention to the outside world. Two figures hovered over me, with a third much larger figure standing above them with his arms crossed.

"Leave him, you two. He's dead," Craig said.

I coughed and spluttered. "Not yet, Craig."

"Carter, you're alive!" Sakura wrapped her arms around me.

"You looked dead." Frank looked down at me and frowned.

Behind him, Bridget smiled. "I told you he was too tough to die."

I sat up and climbed to my feet. Craig straightened his back as soon as I was on my feet again, as though he was trying to remind everyone that he was taller than me.

“Great. Now we have another wounded man to lug around.” Craig rolled his eyes. “Ditch him. He can't protect you girls anymore.”

“Hey, we'd all still be huddled in the break room if Carter hadn't shown up. Show some respect!” Bridget yelled.

“Maybe that's where you should still be,” Craig replied. “Some people are born to be hunters. Others are prey.”

He smirked, looking around. “And the lot of you? You're prey. Your job should be to support me from the rear.” Though he spoke to everyone, he stared at Bridget with darkness in his eyes.

“Fuck off, Craig,” Sakura finally said. “We could have handled those rats on our own. And if we'd have done so, a few of us might even have higher levels than we've got now. I'm sure by now that you've discovered how useful having some extra stat points can be.”

Craig's dark look turned Sakura's way. “The experience points would be wasted on the rest of you. Look at you all. You're running around with table legs. With my gun here, I bet I could level faster than all of you combined.”

He was right. With how fast he'd killed those rats, Craig's level had to be high—probably way higher than mine. Even if I was at full health, I wouldn't dare fight him now.

“What level are you?” I asked, figuring I might as well feel him out.

“After that last batch of rats, I reached level nine,” Craig smugly replied.

I could see him looking at me, and I felt a tingle come from his general direction. He’d just done something, maybe used a skill on me. I wasn’t certain, but it might have been the same perception skill the lawyer in our group had picked up.

“Pfft,” he snorted. “Weak. You’re all too weak to fight. Just go back to the break room, and I’ll guard the door until help arrives.”

There were a few nods from the group behind me. They wanted to take cover and hide while someone else protected them. It was the straightforward path to survival.

Warning! Party cohesion has decreased by 20%

“If we do that, we won’t gain any levels,” Sakura protested. “And you weren’t here, but we already called the police. They aren’t coming.”

Craig’s eyes rolled toward Sakura’s. “I’m sorry, did I ask for your opinion?”

“I’m your boss!” Sakura said. “And I put Carter in charge of our fighting force!”

Craig snorted again. “You used to be my boss. You’re not anymore. No, I think I’m

going to do whatever the hell I want.”

“You...” Sakura scowled.

Craig shook his head. “What are you going to do, fire me?” He laughed.

The others didn’t really get why Craig was laughing so hard, since news of him getting fired hadn’t spread with the arrival of the System. But I saw them start looking between Craig and me. He was taller, stronger, not poisoned by a rat bite, and most importantly, he had a gun.

I was promising them safety if they fought beside me and gained levels. Craig promised them they could hide in the break room while he defended them. I knew who most of them would pick.

Warning! Party cohesion is at 20%! Party cohesion has fallen to critical levels!

I dismissed the prompt. I didn’t need the System to tell me how things were going. As I watched, the party interface flickered and faded. Thirteen of the seventeen faces there disappeared, one by one, until there were only four: Me, Sakura, Bridget, and Frank.

Dissidents have left your party. Party cohesion has stabilized at 65%.

“Clearly, we’re not wanted here,” I said with a shake of my head. “Let’s go.”

“But...” Sakura protested.

I shook my head at her. "They are in Craig's party, now. Let's go scout the rest of the office complex for more survivors."

"Bridget! Ditch those losers!" Craig shouted to Bridget, arms held wide with a boyish grin on his face, "Come join me instead."

"We were doing fine before, Craig. We'll be fine again," Bridget said, though I didn't miss the worried gaze she shot in my direction.

Craig's look soured. "You'll be regretting that decision soon enough, Bridget. I wanted to make you my alpha bitch. my right-hand woman. But if you refuse me now, that offer's gone."

Bridget turned to join us.

"Answer me, Bridget!" Craig shouted after her.

She didn't bother turning around.

We headed deeper into the law office while Craig and the others returned to where they'd come from. Only the three other people still in my party leader's interface came with me. I cast a wary glance back at Craig, half worrying he'd turn around and fire that pistol at my back. I made sure to take cover behind a desk the moment I could. No shot

rang out, which was a good sign.

He probably didn't feel the need to turn violent. This had been a tremendous victory for him. He'd shown up like a hero to save everyone, then humiliated Sakura and me by getting almost everyone to abandon us.

I gritted my teeth. Hopefully, that was the last I'd ever see of that asshole—though something in me doubted my wish was worth the penny I'd metaphorically tossed into the well. With that gun of his, he'd keep leveling faster than I could.

One thing still bothered me, though. Why did his gun work? When we called the police station, they'd said that all the weapons in their armory had stopped working—and yet Craig's pistol worked just fine.

I was so mired in my thoughts, that I stumbled over my own feet. Sakura caught me, glancing up at me with a worried expression. Her gaze darted to my wounded arm, and I realized there was no point in me hiding anything from her.

"I'm poisoned. It's draining vitality from me every so often," I explained.

"What can we do?" Sakura asked, worry on her face. "How can we cure it?"

"We could try to find a first aid kit." I shrugged. "But I think the better option is to keep leveling. If we find more monsters to kill, I can put more stat points into fighting the poison."

And so we started looking for both a first aid kit and more weak enemies to hunt for the

experience. It wasn't long before we found the rest of the lawyers. This had been a big law office, and about as many people survived in it as had survived in our office.

They too had taken cover in their break room, so in a way, we were seeing what might have happened to everyone if they'd stayed there and never left. The lawyers were a little more proactive about defending their break room than the people in our office had been, though. They'd built a barricade in front of it and were throwing mugs, silverware, and even a toaster at an approaching army of giant cockroaches.

These were just like the ones we'd fought before. They looked the same, and they died easily enough to the improvised projectiles. That meant they were level one, which made them perfect for leveling with my new skill.

One thing was obvious, though, the lawyers were weaker than our group. This must be their first real fight. They hadn't leveled as fast as we had, nor as fast as the Rat Matriarch. If something like her attacked this group, she'd be able to tear through their makeshift barricade in seconds and have her rats rip them to pieces.

"We need to help them," I said. "I need to kill a few of those cockroaches to level."

Sakura looked at me with concern. "But Carter... your arm. Are you sure you're fit to be holding a... it's not even a spear anymore?"

I shook my head. "Probably not. But I think I have a new trick. I got a couple of skills to choose from when my Intelligence stat reached ten, and I think I can use it to fight instead."

Rather than describe Mana Bolt, I decided it would be better to just show her. So I held up my good hand and pointed at the nearest cockroach. Just as I realized I had no idea

how to use this Mana Bolt, I felt it work. The moment I used it, the knowledge of how to work the ability flooded my mind with a sharp and sudden pinch. I winced.

Using mana for the first time felt strange. Like I was moving a muscle I never knew I had for the first time. The closest analogy I could think of, was using my mind to squeeze brain juice from my skull and pour it into a ball in my palm.

The feeling left me lightheaded, but by the time I was done, a shimmering ball of something clung to my hand. I imagined it shooting forward, and the mana bolt soared in an unfaltering straight line that struck the nearest cockroach.

The moment it touched the cockroach, the monster froze. Its shell cracked right down the center, and its guts splattered across the ground like it had been hit by a rock. It seemed like Mana Bolt was a simple kinetic energy attack.

You have slain [Cockroach - Level 1]!

You have gained the Neutral Mana proficiency!

You have gained the Caster proficiency!

The lawyers behind the barricade spotted my attack as well. Several stood up from where they were hidden behind their barricade to see who was attacking, which struck me as very poor survival instincts. I waved to them, and Sakura raised her club in salute. The people behind the barricade cheered, which we took as an invitation to join the fight.

Sakura and Frank led the charge, with Bridget following close behind. Sakura started herding some cockroaches toward me, and she even gave some of them a light bash, so they were already wounded—all it took was a small mana bolt from me to finish them. That was good, because I was getting a feel for the skill and realized I'd been way overcommitting the amount of mana I needed in each bolt.

The skill provided diminishing returns the more mana I invested in the attack, and past a certain threshold, it was no longer worthwhile to add more mana when I could just use that same power to cast a second bolt. At the high end of the spectrum, I could splatter a cockroach across the floor like I had with my first bolt, or I could punch ten finger-sized holes in their shells like shooting little magical bullets. Part of the trick was gauging exactly how big a bolt I needed to create to kill the cockroaches in one blow, without using a single drop of power more than was necessary—what provided the greatest effect for the least amount of power expended.

Even so, I started feeling lightheaded when I killed the fifth cockroach, and a warning flashed before my eyes.

Warning. Your mana has reached critical thresholds!

Depleting your mana reserves further may result in unconsciousness.

I had to hold off on casting any more mana bolts. But I still hadn't received a level. It seemed like the System didn't like the idea of strong people killing a lot of enemies that were many levels weaker than them to farm experience points. It seems I'd approached the threshold where these cockroaches were doing increasingly less for me. But at the same time, I was too wounded to fight anything closer to my own level.

Come on... just one more...

I grit my teeth, hoping the notification of a new level-up would come soon. Sakura sensed something was wrong when I stopped using Mana Bolt. My head hurt nearly as much as my arm did, and I was stumbling around more than walking. Sakura ducked beneath my arm to steady me, looking like she wanted to bring me to safety. But I shook my head and pointed at the remaining cockroaches.

She helped me over to them, kicked them over one by one to reveal their more vulnerable underbellies, which let me stomp on them with her help.

You have slain [Cockroach - Level 1] x8.

Congratulations. You have advanced to level 5!

Caster Proficiency has reached 2.

I sighed in relief the moment the notification I was waiting for finally came. I quickly put a point into vitality, bringing my total up to 9. That had me just about even with what I'd lost from the Toxic Bite, and I wasn't losing ground to it anymore. My health was staying roughly even.

But that brought me face to face with a new problem. I didn't have enough mana to use in a long fight. My headache hadn't come from my missing health points, but from my depleted mana pool. That was bad, since there was no guarantee the next foe we ran into would be as weak as these cockroaches.

What if we ran into something like the Rat Matriarch?

More points in vitality might bring me up to full health, but I doubted that alone would be enough to heal my Toxic Bite affliction. And I had a hunch that the affliction simply wouldn't let me get to full health.

But sometimes they say the best defense is a good offense. I wanted to empower Mana Bolt to the point that I could blast even the Rat Matriarch aside if I needed to. Even with depleted health, I could stand back behind the others and shoot projectiles at our enemies to contribute that way. Whereas, if I tossed my remaining points into vitality, I'd just be another compromised front-line fighter with a debilitating wound until I found a way to heal it.

So, I put my remaining three points into Intelligence, further bolstering my mana reserves. The last traces of my headache vanished. And even though I hadn't regenerated much of my mana pool, I suddenly felt like I could fire off a half dozen more Mana Bolts without issue. I definitely didn't plan on picking a fight, though, until I'd regenerated a bit more of my reserve.

"Carter... are you?" Sakura asked, worry in her eyes.

"I'm a little better now. The affliction is still there, but it won't be killing me any time soon."

Sakura wrapped her arms around me, sighing in relief. She seemed more relieved at the news that I'd live than I was.

"I'm glad." She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder.

I winced, since it was my right shoulder, and that entire arm still throbbed.

She noticed a moment later and pulled away. "Sorry!"

"Try the other side next time," I chuckled. "Anyway, let's go meet the lawyers from across the hall."

I gestured to the survivors who'd barricaded themselves in their break room. They waved us over, eyes still darting to the dead cockroaches on the ground.

Sakura wasn't exactly friends with everyone here, but she recognized a few people by name. Her father's company owned the building, so she was at least a familiar face to most folks at the law firm. She was the one who collected their rent, after all.

"What's going on? Why are there monsters everywhere?" A man asked.

"It's the apocalypse... You know, the end of the world?" I replied.

The man gaped at me with an expression of shock and disbelief. I gestured all around us. If he didn't believe the world had changed, nothing I could have said would change his mind.

"But... but... my family! I have to get to them!"

I grimaced. Based on the casualty rates in the office, a lot of people would be missing their loved ones. From the look on Sakura's face, she'd just had the same realization.

I let out a quick sigh. "Can I leave this to you?" I asked.

Sakura nodded, so I let them talk to her. They had many obvious questions—mostly about what had happened, if we'd experienced the same strange meeting with the System they did, and if monsters were showing up everywhere or just in their office. Sakura brought them up to speed while I browsed my menus and waited for my mana pool to recover.

Carter Smith (Human, Level 5. Rank F)

Strength: 6

Agility: 4

Perception: 6

Vitality: 9

Intelligence: 13

Willpower: 6

There was more to this menu. I'd glimpsed it the last time I was fiddling with my settings, but I had been too busy allocating stat points to look into it. I was pretty sure I'd seen it when I focused on my stats.

I strained my eyes, staring at the words floating before me. After a second, the information besides my name expanded.

Human (Earth) - F Rank

Species Level Cap: 25 (End of E Rank)

Class Titles: None

A level cap for humanity? I didn't like the sound of that. Level 25 still felt like a long way away, but I knew I'd get there eventually.

I tried to focus on that phrase to see if I could get the System to share more information, but nothing came up. It probably wanted me to earn the information on my own or something. The System seemed very intent on making everyone work for every scrap.

Class titles had been explained to me by the System during my brief meeting with it. I would start seeing them at level ten, which was coming up sooner than I thought. I stared at the rest of my stats.

My most pressing need, right now, was to cure the Toxic Bite infecting my arm, so more Vitality might be helpful. Crossing ten in Intelligence had given me a skill, and I'd heard crossing ten in Perception did the same. Would the same hold true for Vitality? I was starting to reconsider my recent allocation of stat points. Maybe I really should have pushed vitality to ten with one more point.

It might be worth trying if I couldn't find any other way to cure this Toxic Bite. The trouble for me was that my main attack scaled off Intelligence. I needed to keep that strong, so I had at least one powerful ability to deal with enemies. It would be a careful balancing act between investing enough points into stats to get them up to ten and unlock whatever benefit they had, and also distributing enough points into my combat stats so that I could continue to defend myself and gain levels.

After all, I didn't plan to stay in this office for much longer—not with Craig here and gaining levels faster than I was with his gun. I had some supplies back at my apartment and even more in my secret mountaintop hideaway. I hadn't known exactly what form Myrina's apocalypse would take, so many of my preparations would be useless—but

not all of them.

And the sooner I got to my supplies, the sooner I'd be able to use them.

"Hey, Carter!" Sakura yelled to catch my attention. I noted that sitting down and relaxing had restored my mana points faster than when I'd been standing. Maybe next time, I'd try meditating. "Everyone is wondering what that trick was that made the cockroaches explode when you pointed at them!"

I stood, and I saw Sakura smiling when she saw I was walking steadily again.

"Hey there," I nodded to the two lawyers my former boss was speaking with, a man and a woman. I'd seen them around the building before, but never had cause to talk to them.

"This is Margaret and Benjamin. The pair of them started this law firm a decade ago, just after they got married," Sakura said by way of introduction. "Margaret, Benjamin, this is Carter, my right-hand man."

I ran my fingers sheepishly through my hair, scratching the back of my neck. My actual position had been nothing important, but Sakura had put me in charge of all matters related to office combat and survival. So I guess, in a sense, I really was her right-hand man.

"Pleased to meet you," Margaret said as she held out her hand. I shook hers and then her husband Benjamin's hand right afterwards.

The couple looked extremely similar. The man was slightly taller and had slightly shorter

hair, but otherwise, they were dressed in matching suits and had the same stern expression on their faces. They reminded me a lot of Sakura trying to look as boss-like as possible in front of her employees. Except for these two, it looked like this was their natural disposition.

“So, Sakura said your office survived this crazy giant bug attack situation largely thanks to you.” Benjamin’s grip was firm, and I returned the gesture. He was pretty strong, but I wasn’t sure if that was because he’d started strong or because he’d recently put points into his strength stat.

“I can’t take all that much credit. Everybody fought for their own survival,” I replied.

“But that trick of yours! You just pointed at the cockroaches, and they exploded! What was that?”

There was no reason to withhold any information, so I answered honestly. “That was a skill called Mana Bolt. I was given something called a skill book when my Intelligence stat reached ten. Since Mana Bolt seemed most directly applicable to combat, that was the one I chose. I think you get the option for a skill or something for every stat that reaches ten.”

“Fascinating. So there really is something to these stats...” Benjamin muttered.

Margaret elbowed him in the side. “I told you, dear, it’s like a video game!”

“So it is, dear. So it is...” Benjamin ran his fingers across his chin in thought. “Tell me, Carter. Do you think we should aim for this Mana Bolt, as well? I received a level for killing some of those bugs. Should I put all those points into Intelligence?”

I shrugged. “That’s up for you to decide. But I don’t think the Intelligence stat is the only one worth leveling. I think you get a very useful skill that lets you see enemy levels once you hit ten for perception. I plan to pick that one up whenever I can spare the stat points.”

“I see. I see...” Benjamin nodded. “In that case, it would do well for us to diversify our efforts. Perhaps we can have different folks aim for increasing each stat to ten, then pool our knowledge about what skills are unlocked. That seems like the best way to figure this thing out.”

“That would be clever.” I nodded. “We’ll keep in touch.”

That really seemed like a useful idea. Benjamin and Margaret seemed like they had good heads on their shoulders, and they were remarkably calm—considering the circumstances. It would be a long time before I earned enough stat points to spare what would be needed to reach ten in every stat. But with a bunch of people working together, we could figure out exactly how the System worked much faster.

Margret and Benjamin had stayed in the break room since the integration began and had been exploring their stat menus the entire time, so while they had little experience fighting monsters, they had plenty of knowledge to share. I was pleased to have made their acquaintance.

“Oh, one last thing before we go. Do you guys have a first aid kit?” I asked.

They had a first aid kit sitting unattended in the break room’s corner. I had planned on wrapping up my rat bite to protect it, so it didn’t hurt quite so much the next time Sakura brushed up against me. But I was greeted by a pleasant surprise, finding a tube of

topical antibiotic sitting on top of everything else. It wasn't anything special, just the typical yellow-tube stuff with some pain relievers mixed in. But it was perfect for me.

You have applied [Antitoxin Medicine - Common].

Your affliction [Toxic Bite] is reduced in severity.

I tried to apply more Antitoxin Medicine but didn't receive another message. It looked like that was all the effect I would get out of the tube. Still, maybe applying it again later would have the same effect.

"Do you mind if I take this? I'll pay you back at some point." I held up the first aid kit.

Benjamin waved his hand. "With all the tips you gave us? Consider it a gift given in thanks." He leaned in close. "Also, I'm pretty sure that it's Sakura's first aid kit, anyhow. She loaned it to us a month ago and we forgot to give it back."

We parted ways a few minutes later, heading towards the stairwell again.

Sakura turned to me in surprise once we were out of the law office. "I'm surprised. I thought you were going to have them follow us or something," Sakura said.

I had thought about doing just that. There were certain benefits to having a large party, and I was sure I'd be able to talk Benjamin into joining us. But the chain of command would be unclear since the people in that office worked for him and not Sakura. I had an even more important reason for not teaming up with them.

“It would have been a bad idea.” I shook my head. “That was their first fight, which means they can’t be above level two. That means they’d need to fight cockroaches or something like them. I don’t know about you two, but I’ve been getting far fewer experience points from cockroaches than I used to. We need to find and fight stronger monsters. They wouldn’t survive fighting stronger monsters.”

“I see...” Sakura nodded. “Well, I suppose those insights are why I put you in charge!”

There were four floors in total in our office building, but not all were filled. The economy hadn’t been in the best shape when the apocalypse began, so Sakura only had five of the eight offices filled. Assuming the same ratio of survivors held true in each office, I estimated there were about eighty people left in the building.

I revised my estimations downward when we came to the next office, one floor up.

“Oh god, I’m going to be sick,” Bridget went pale.

Frank shook his head.

We stood before a pile of bloody and shredded corpses.

Sakura turned her head to avoid looking at it, and I wanted to do the same. But I needed to examine the corpses.

“These look like rat bites...” I muttered. “I think we now know how those rats leveled so

fast.”

If only I'd killed the Rat Matriarch the first time we'd met outside of Sakura's office. Some of these people might still be alive. I turned to see the others all looking queasy, and the grim sight had my stomach roiling as well.

“If the rats were here, they aren't here anymore. Let's go check the other wing,” I said.

We headed across the stairwell to check out the other office on this floor we hadn't explored yet. There were corpses here, too, but there were also a few folks still alive. Like the law office, many of these people had locked themselves into the break room. A few others stood on desks. Beneath them, giant cockroaches crawled on the floor, or munched on a pair of bodies in the center of the room.

There were seven cockroaches, but only four of them were the same size as I was used to seeing. The other three were twice as large. That those three were the ones munching on the human corpses didn't escape my notice. They'd probably leveled up with those kills.

“Oh god, not again.” Bridget averted her gaze, and Sakura tucked herself behind me.

“We'll avenge them,” I promised. “Get ready for another fight. Let's take care of these bugs.”

I nudged Sakura toward the bigger bugs gnawing on the human corpses. Bridget and Frank were lower level than the two of us, so it would be better to leave the weaker cockroaches to them. We would take on these stronger ones, since it would probably take killing dozens of the weaker cockroaches for either of us to level.

Once Sakura saw my gaze was set on our enemies, her own expression firmed. Her aversion to the corpses was overcome with bitter determination to avenge them.

“I’ll handle the front line this time,” Sakura said. “Can you fire your magic bolts from behind me?”

I nodded. The man in me didn’t really like sitting safe behind her while Sakura held the front line. I wanted to be up there alongside her. But with my wound, I couldn’t fight properly, and between the two of us, I was the only one with any sort of ranged ability. It was only natural that I be the one to support her from behind.

The smaller cockroaches scuttled around the room, trying to get away from us as we approached. But I ignored them completely, focusing entirely on the larger monsters. Bridget and Frank peeled off to deal with the small fry.

The bigger cockroaches turned to regard us both, and now that I could see them up close, I realized their mandibles were as wide around as my wrist. Instead of just nibbling at your legs, these bugs could probably snap off a limb and eat it. In fact, judging by the state of the corpses behind them, they’d been doing just that.

Sakura attacked with her club, smashing down on top of a massive cockroach. It tried to dodge, but for all its many legs, it wasn’t as nimble as Sakura. She hit it in the back with all her strength—which was considerable, now that she’d put more points into the stat.

Even with that, it shrugged off Sakura’s attack without a scratch. This cockroach was far tougher than the level-one variety. It was still stunned, but that was all. Even worse, the other two giant cockroaches started heading for her.

The moment Sakura was in danger, my Hero of Sakura Miyamoto title kicked in and boosted all my stats. Suddenly, fighting with her on the frontline seemed like the logical choice.

I poured extra mana into my next Mana Bolt. These things were bigger and tougher than their level one brethren, so I scaled up the amount of damage I was doing accordingly. My spell landed squarely on the third giant bug, blasting right through its torso and shattering the armor over its thorax. The monster stumbled backward, convulsing and twitching until it collapsed onto its back.

Sakura charged forward, slamming her club into the second giant cockroach's head. With enough force to shatter her table leg, she crushed the cockroach's head instantly. Its body toppled to the ground in pieces, leaving nothing behind except a trail of slimy green blood.

Your Caster proficiency has increased to 3.

I dealt with the other cockroach that Sakura had stunned the same way, because Sakura now only held half a club. I pushed my Mana Bolt ability hard and struck the remaining large cockroach in the face, driving it back.

Sakura discarded her broken weapon, her eyes darting around before they lit on a baseball bat leaning against the wall. She used the momentary distraction my mana bolts gave her to snatch it up. It was bigger than the table leg she had been using, and had a bit more heft to it. She returned and gave the big cockroach another swing, this time shattering its shell. Now weak and crippled, my next mana bolt finished it off.

You have slain [Cockroach Scavenger - Level 3] x3

I was surprised to get credit for all three kills, but Sakura said she'd also got all three kill notifications. It seemed the System knew when people were working together, and experience points were shared accordingly. At least now we didn't need to worry about who got in the last hit.

Frank and Bridget had finished the last of the other four cockroaches by then, and the survivors in the office were stepping down from where they'd hid on top of their desks or coming out from the break room.

"The monsters are dead for now, but I would be careful. There are things more dangerous than those bugs roaming the halls," I warned everyone present as they stared back at us.

"Those things... they were monsters!" A man shouted.

"I know. And we killed them for you. But we won't always be there to kill them," I replied.

"Is help coming?"

I shook my head. "Look, if you want to be safe, head downstairs to the law office. There's a man and a woman down there named Benjamin and Margret. Tell them Carter sent you and join up with them."

These people looked to be about the same level as most in the law office, so they would probably do well to team up with the lawyers. Hopefully, with enough numbers, even a creature like the Rat Matriarch would think twice about attacking them.

The rest of our exploration was uneventful after that. We cleared out every room and cubical on the second floor, save for one small office that we found locked—where we found a woman hiding underneath a desk. She looked terrified and was trembling, but Bridget talked her out of hiding and had her take shelter one floor down with the others.

On the third floor, we encountered another group of survivors. This time, there were six of them, including a middle-aged couple huddled in a corner. One of them was injured and bleeding, but it didn't seem serious enough that their death was imminent. Thankfully I was still carrying the first aid kit, so we patched them up and sent all of them to Margret and Benjamin.

The other wing of the third floor was the strangest of all. Apparently, the manager in charge there had decided that two-thirds of his employees vanishing—and a magical talking voice telling everyone it was the apocalypse—was no excuse for not getting work done. When we walked in wielding improvised weapons and covered in insect blood, he tried to shoo us away.

“What are you doing, Damien?” Sakura asked, bewildered. “We need to evacuate these people!”

“My bonus depends on us getting these TPS reports done on time! I don't care if the internet is out or if two-thirds of my employees vanished.”

I sighed. “Damien, you're going to get yourself and all your employees killed.”

He glared at me furiously. “Don't lecture me. You're not qualified.”

Damien was annoying, and part of me wanted to let him get eaten by a giant rat or a horde of bugs. But his employees didn't deserve to die for his ignorance, and his

position was understandable. The System had appeared, and they'd all gone through a strange experience, but without being thrown into a life-or-death situation, it was easy to fall into old habits and just get back to work.

I needed to shock them out of their stupor, and for that I needed a monster. So I went back to the other wing, scooped up two level-one cockroaches, and let them loose on Damien's desk.

He screamed like a little girl, and I had a good laugh.

"Heavens above, what the hell are those things?!" Damien shrieked as he backed away from the giant cockroaches.

I pointed a finger at the bug and put it down with a Mana Bolt while Sakura bashed the other one into a sticky mess on a pile of papers. Looks like there was no way Damien would get all his TPS reports done now.

"That's what will eat you if you don't get your people to safety," I explained. "Everyone is grouping up on the first floor."

By now, the monsters had drawn everyone's attention, and the way I'd killed it simply by pointing at it had been almost as shocking as the mess that covered the TPS reports.

"You all have stat menus. They're there for a reason. The world has changed, and your old lives are dead and gone. To survive, you will have to fight monsters like these."

Sakura picked up where I'd left off. "If you stay here doing what you're doing, you'll die

the first time one of these creatures finds your office. If you don't want to die, head down to Margaret and Benjamin's office on the first floor. That is where we're sending everyone."

"Don't blow this out of proportion! It's just a few bugs!" Damien glared at me, but then whirled on Sakura. "Sakura, get control of your employee, please! We don't pay rent to have our workdays disrupted."

Sakura shook her head. "If you don't believe Carter, just head to the other wing. Two bodies are still there, lying on the floor."

Damien's face paled, and a few employees stood and left to check before their boss could order them back to work. Once they came back and spread the word, I was pretty sure the rest of the people in the office wouldn't care what Damien told them to do anymore.

Having said my piece, I left. Some of them would do as I said, but it looked like Damian was intent on keeping everyone in their cubicles. I'd check on them again on the way back down, but every moment we wasted on them was a moment we weren't helping the others on the top floor.

The survivors on the fourth floor were untouched, though convincing them to leave was a lot easier than arguing with Damien had been. I found another first aid kit, and I used it to replenish the supplies in the one I was carrying. I also applied more antibiotic ointment, and like I'd hoped, it was effective again.

You have applied Antitoxin Medicine (Common).

The severity of Toxic Bite has been reduced.

The affliction still hadn't gone away, but it was not taking away health points as frequently anymore. My health points had stabilized higher than they'd been when I was wounded, and now I was running pretty consistently at two-thirds of my maximum.

We ran into a few more of those Cockroach Scavengers, which was a bad thing for the people they were harassing, but a good thing for our group because everyone gained another level.

Congratulations! You have reached level 6.

You have four stat points to distribute.

I allocated my stats, putting two into Intelligence, hoping to grow my mana reserves a little more. There wasn't really any increase in the quality of my attacks, but I could store far more mana than before—enough that I could go an entire fight just casting Mana Bolt.

The throbbing in my arm had reduced significantly with the antibiotics, and now I was finally confident about being able to get rid of the poisoned affliction completely. All I needed was one big push in the right direction.

I put the remaining two points into Vitality. Maybe crossing the stat threshold of ten with Vitality would provide that push. As I added the points, I held my breath.

The theories Ben and I had batted back and forth proved valid. Just like with Perception and Intelligence, Vitality also granted a skill when it reached ten.

Your Vitality has reached 10.

You have been granted a vitality skill book!

You may select one Vitality skill from the following options. Choose carefully! The skills you utilize and the feats you perform will reflect in the class choices you will be presented with at level 10.

- **Book of Sacrifice (Common) - Give your health points to another, healing them and damaging yourself.**
- **Book of Regeneration (Common) - Increases health point regeneration by double when active. Can also regrow lost limbs.**
- **Book of Mind Over Flesh (Uncommon) - Grants the ability to convert mana into health points.**

Once again, I had three skills offered to me. Sacrifice was out—I wasn't about to become a healer who had to hurt himself to heal. Especially when it would leave me without a way to heal myself afterwards. That sounded like a good way to get myself killed.

Regeneration sounded interesting, as it would immediately help deal with my Toxic Bite affliction. I could probably get myself to full health with it, which might make the affliction go away completely.

But I ignored it in favor of the third skill, Mind Over Flesh. The ability was a higher rank

than the others, which was good. But beyond that, it synergized well with my stats—given that I'd been pouring points into my Intelligence stat. That was the skill I took.

I was asked if I wanted the physical skill book or just the skill, and once again I took the skill. My choice proved to be the right one a moment later, when I converted most of my remaining mana points into health points, instantly bringing myself to full health.

Your health has been restored to maximum capacity.

The affliction Toxic Bite has been removed.

I flexed my arm again, whole and healthy once more. Not bad—not bad at all.

“Let's finish up here, and then head back downstairs to see how the survivors are doing. If they get attacked again, I want us to be ready.”

And while I was at it, I wanted to keep an eye on Craig. I didn't know what he was up to, but I knew he'd get into trouble eventually.

When we returned to the third floor, Damien was still at his desk—alone. Everyone else in the office had picked up their things and left. He scowled at us as we walked by, and I shook my head. If he wanted to die for an end of year bonus that would never come, that was on him. At least he wouldn't be getting anyone else killed.

There were more Scavenger Cockroaches nibbling on the corpses on the second floor, and we killed them before continuing down to rejoin the survivors we'd gathered so far. I

saw no more signs of the rats, which meant we'd probably killed all but the Rat Matriarch in that big fight. I was worried about her as much as I was concerned about Craig. She was probably terrorizing one of the neighboring office complexes.

"We haven't checked the basement yet," Sakura suggested. "Nobody's been down there in ages."

I nodded. "That's probably where all the cockroaches and rats came from in the first place."

We checked it out and, sure enough, there were plenty of level one cockroaches—no rats, though. There was, however, a huge hole in the bulkhead door, that told me the Rat Matriarch had probably left the building to go lick her wounds. When we realized the cockroaches weren't giving any of us levels anymore, we decided to leave them be.

"These will be a valuable resource for some of the others when they come to terms with our situation," I explained.

"Yes, fighting a couple of level one cockroaches will be a lot safer for them than going after giant rats or those rogue printers Carter likes stabbing so much," Bridget said.

Sakura nodded along.

We left the rest of the cockroaches be, though I did have some gains to show for clearing the rest of the office.

Your Caster proficiency has reached 4!

Your Neutral Mana proficiency has reached 2!

It was a bit odd how much faster Caster was increasing over both Neutral Mana and Improvised Weapons. I could only reason that not all proficiencies were equal. Some were simply tougher to improve.

Now that I had some time, I examined the effects of both proficiencies. They truly were worth increasing, and the gains from them were almost as great as getting another level.

Caster Proficiency 4: Increases the damage of magical projectiles.

Current bonus: Additional 40% effect on all targets.

I'd seen evidence of my proficiency increasing as I leveled it up, the bonus increasing by ten percent each time. At Caster Proficiency ten, my Mana Bolts would be twice as potent. That was good, because I was starting to hit a ceiling with them when it came to raw stopping power. Even one charged as much as I could charge it wasn't powerful enough to bring down a target of my own level.

Though my mana capacity scaled with my intelligence, that wasn't true of Mana Bolt's damage. Increasing my Caster Proficiency was the only way to make those attacks more powerful—and until I got another spell I would be reliant on that proficiency to increase my damage.

Neutral Mana Proficiency 2: Increases the efficiency of all neutral mana used.

Current bonus: 20%

The Neutral Mana proficiency improved at the same ten percent increase rate that Caster did—but instead of boosting damage, it boosted the amount of times I could cast Mana Bolt. All told, it didn't seem particularly valuable to me at the moment, though it was by far the harder proficiency to increase. If I had more spells, I'm sure I would be singing a different tune.

We headed back up to talk to Benjamin and Margret. Their office was just about overflowing with people now that they'd taken everyone in that they could. A few had wandered over to our old office on the other side of the hall, but most people were staying here for now. Perhaps they'd had a run-in with Craig before the apocalypse.

There must have been a few more cockroach attacks since we'd left, because Benjamin was busy directing people to set up additional defenses.

"How goes it?" I asked.

Margaret smiled at me. "Thank you for saving our asses back there. I didn't realize how bad these bugs would get. We've had to fend off a few bigger variants since you left. We've got everyone barricaded in the conference room right now."

Benjamin frowned and shook his head. "I think we're getting more and more of the big ones."

"I know exactly what you mean. Those big ones are the Scavenger Cockroaches, right? We've fought quite a few of them ourselves. I think eating part of a human body lets them evolve. Unfortunately, there are a lot of corpses upstairs, so until we bury them, we're probably going to keep dealing with those Scavenger Cockroaches."

Benjamin frowned. “We can hold them off for now easily enough. But we went from regular ordinary cockroaches to giant cockroaches to massive cockroaches in only two hours. Who is to say we won’t be dealing with cockroaches the size of this building by tomorrow? Not that we have enough food to keep everyone fed for that. It hasn’t even been an hour, and the break room fridge is completely empty.”

I ran my fingers through my hair as Benjamin, Sakura, and Margaret all circled up around me. “I see two options here. Either we leave the building to go look for food, or we start cooking and eating the cockroaches. Leaving the building will get us food that’s a lot more appealing to the people here, but whoever makes the trip will be taking their life in their hands. We already know of one powerful, ferocious monster roaming the area.”

I told them about the Rat Matriarch and how tough she’d been to beat the last time we’d fought her. Benjamin and Margaret took me at my word that this rat was big enough to rip a man limb from limb. She was probably even bigger and stronger, by now. And that was just one monster. What about the ones we didn’t know about?

In the end, they gave in to the safer but more disgusting option of talking everyone into eating cockroaches. I left it to them to break the news to everyone. For my part, I knew that the levels of the monsters in the office building were too low to give me many experience points.

I’d need to leave soon if I wanted to keep grinding levels. The same went for Sakura, though Bridget and Frank could stand to grind out at least one more level each against the Scavenger Cockroaches.

I was just getting ready to break the news to Benjamin and Margaret that I planned on taking a field trip, when the door down the hall opened. I felt a tingle run up the back of my neck like a sixth sense, and my head whipped around to see Craig standing in the doorway.

He looked taller than he had before. He'd always had muscles, but now they were twice as large. He'd definitely put points into strength, maybe even all the points he'd gained.

And I knew he'd gained a lot of points. He was down to three magazines for his pistol. Our old office had probably been attacked by just as many cockroaches as Benjamin's and Margaret's. I bet Craig took all the experience points for himself.

"Hello again, Craig." My guarded tone was a warning to the others.

Margaret and Benjamin each took a step back, but Sakura stood tall by my side.

"Carter, Benjamin." Craig nodded at us, not paying much attention to Sakura or Margaret. He stared at us for a moment, and I felt a tingle run up my spine at his gaze, like he was piercing me straight down to my bones. Then, after squinting a while, he sneered at Benjamin and looked smug while staring at me. "Looks like you two are having a little defense pow-wow. I don't think it's appropriate to have one without me."

Benjamin chewed on his lip a moment as he figured out a diplomatic response, but his wife beat him to it with a scowl.

"You're welcome to join us if you feel like contributing something useful to the conversation." Margaret crossed her arms over her chest and glared up at Craig.

Craig shrugged. "Sure, miss. My contribution is that I can kick ass however and whenever I please." He smiled, flexing his newly swollen biceps in admiration. They looked twice as big as before. He'd probably dumped quite a few points into strength. "Monster or man."

My fingers twitched. I wondered if Mana Bolt would hurt Craig. But no. I'd had enough experience with the attack to know it wouldn't take him down, even with a fully powered shot. My Mana Bolts weren't a match for the bullets in his gun, especially considering Craig was probably a higher level than anything I'd faced. I shoved all thoughts of a surprise attack aside. The chance of success was just too low.

"...Right. I'm sure your contributions will be key to protecting all the good people of this office," Benjamin said, shooting me a glance out of the corner of his eyes while he spoke.

It looked like it would be up to me to fend him off, so I said what was on everyone's minds. "Why are you here, Craig? What do you want?"

I expected him to get angry, but he smiled. "I want to bring everyone under my wing. After all, I'm the strongest here. I should be in charge."

"Might does not make right," Benjamin said.

Craig smiled and tapped the handle of his gun.

Benjamin paled and took a step backward, returning to his prior strategy of letting me do all the talking.

He was acting friendly now, but I could see the hostility behind Craig's eyes. He still hadn't forgotten about the incident in the hallway. Or about me standing behind Sakura as she fired him. In his mind, he'd been slighted, and he wouldn't be satisfied until he was certain he'd made me pay.

“If you want to be helpful, you could clear out the basement. There are plenty of cockroaches down there.” I waited, hoping he’d take the bait. There were truthfully a lot of cockroaches down there, but they were all level one. If Craig relied exclusively on his gun, he’d have to use every bullet he had left on them—and he’d barely get any experience points for killing them all.

I wasn’t sure what level he was at, but I’d have an easier time keeping up with him if we both had to make do with improvised weapons. As it was, I was certain he was a higher level than me, thanks to how much easier it was for him to kill stuff with a proper weapon.

Craig looked like he was considering the idea, but after glancing at his remaining magazines, he snorted. “Sounds like your problem, not mine. I’ll deal with them if they come for me and mine,” Craig said.

“And what about all those people you promised to protect in our office? Surely they’d be safer if you took out those bugs before they become a problem,” Margaret argued.

Craig rolled his eyes. “I won’t waste my time fighting a few tiny bugs. I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to get me to leave so you can talk everyone in the office into coming over to join you and Benjamin over here while I’m busy fighting. I’ve seen through your scheme; I’m too clever to be fooled so easily.”

That hadn’t been my plan at all, nor did I really see the benefit of doing such a thing. But I also knew I would not convince Craig of anything when he’d already decided he knew what was what. Still, I felt like I should point out the obvious flaw in his logic.

“Maybe not with the cockroaches, but sooner or later, you’ll be busy. You can’t do

everything yourself.”

Craig smirked. “And that’s actually why I’m here. I’m going to take a look at the people you’ve gathered together, and I’ll take the fiercest of them under my wing.” Without another word, he stalked off. His eyes focused on several survivors lingering near the barricade, and it was soon obvious that he had the skill that let him see people's levels.

That tingle running up my spine must have been him using that skill. The smug look on his face afterwards was probably because he realized he was a higher level than me. I was thankful we’d kept things civil, even though I knew he was still nursing a grudge.

“Hey, listen up!” Craig shouted. His voice boomed over the sound of chatter and barricade construction. “Put that shit down and listen to me!”

He sounded louder and more impressive than I thought possible for a human. I wasn’t sure if that was his strength points or some other ability, but most folks stopped talking and turned to listen.

Craig was unsatisfied with most. He wanted everyone looking at him. So, a moment later, he pulled out his gun and fired two shots into the air. That finally got everyone quiet and looking his way.

“I need some tough bastards ready to fight tooth and nail to defend what’s theirs. Step up if you think you’re man enough. Anyone who follows me gets their pick of good food, good beds, and good women. I’m raiding the convenience store next door. Who’s in?”

Craig’s speech was brief and to the point. Combined with his outfit and the gun in his hand, he looked far tougher than Benjamin standing next to me in a suit and tie.

A few people stepped forward to show their interest.

Craig rolled his eyes over them one after another, probably using his level-revealing skill on each of them to check their levels.

“Not you. Fuck off. You... maybe. You get lost. Yeah, you stand over here.” Craig pointed at person after person. Those rejected stormed away in a huff, but those who Craig viewed positively seemed even more inclined to hear what Craig had to say, since he’d singled them out as special. In less than thirty seconds, Craig had a group of six guys standing behind him who all looked much like he did—tall, square-jawed, and muscular, though none quite as much as Craig himself.

Next, he turned to some of the women hovering around the area and started pointing out a few of them as well. As soon as he’d picked the first three, his criteria was obvious. He was just picking the hottest young women in the crowd.

“Nice tits, you're in. You... turn around? Mmm, passable ass. You're in. You could stand to lose a few pounds, but I'll take you for now,” Craig mumbled.

I turned and saw Benjamin’s fingers digging into his palm. He and Margaret came to the same realization I’d come to.

“He’s going to take our best fighters,” Margaret hissed. “The ones who’ve proven themselves best at fending off those bugs.”

I shrugged. “Probably. But he’s the highest level in the office, which means none of us can do a thing about it.”

Benjamin turned back to me. “He’s promising food, shelter, and women to join him on the other side of the office. We’re going to look like idiots when we tell everyone they have to start eating cockroaches to survive.”

Like it or not, we were in a competition with Craig. Or rather, Benjamin and Margaret were. After the rest of my office ditched me, the only people I felt any responsibility toward were Sakura, Frank, and Bridget. Which was probably for the best. I’d only ever planned on keeping myself alive after the apocalypse, not an entire village. Stretching my skills to help a few others out was already pushing me to my limits.

While Benjamin and I whispered to one another, Craig selected several more women.

“You, you, and... hmm... I guess you’ll do, but just barely. Oh, and Bridget! Get your ass over here!” Craig yelled at Bridget, who stood just behind and to my left.

“Fuck off, Craig,” Bridget yelled back.

This wasn’t the first time Craig had been turned down. In fact, most of the women he’d selected were ignoring him, and more than a few had flashed middle fingers his way. But this was the first time someone had spurned him so directly.

“Well, alright then.” Craig scoffed, casting her a glare that lingered a little too long. He didn’t stop staring until Sakura pulled Bridget behind her aside and scowled back at him.

Craig’s eyebrows rose in surprise when he came across Sakura. Now that I looked at her more closely, Sakura had definitely gotten hotter. Maybe it was the stats, or maybe I was seeing her in a different light, but her torn suit and my long-sleeved shirt as a tunic

fit her much better than I would ever have imagined.

Craig was the kind to hold a grudge—and he still held one against Sakura for firing him—which was especially evident when he turned his gaze to meet mine.

“You’ve got your people, Craig. Now let’s see if you can keep them alive.” I spoke loud enough that Craig’s new circle of followers could hear me, and a few of them seemed to be having second thoughts.

At least until Craig let his hand skim over the grip of his pistol. He flashed me a cocksure sneer and then, without another word, he spun around and left. His new recruits followed close behind.

Craig’s dramatic entrance, speech, and exit caught everyone’s eye. Even those who had no interest in his offer were talking about him.

“Wasn’t that the building’s security guy?” a woman asked. “Didn’t he harass Jessica in the hallway last month? I was certain he’d be fired for that! Does he have blackmail on the building manager or something?”

“The dude just pointed at a bunch of chicks and told them to follow him, and some of them actually did. Holy shit, I can’t believe that worked,” a man said in awe, mentally jotting down a few notes for future reference.

I really hoped nobody was taking dating advice from Craig. Those girls were probably just scared out of their wits, and Craig looked like he could protect them.

“It looks like he’s building a more exclusive team of survivors than ours. He’s taking the best. And did you hear what he said? They’re actually going to brave the monsters outside to find food,” another woman said.

“I know Benjamin and Margaret don’t have any supplies. Maybe that Craig guy knows something we don’t. We should have tried to get him to take us, too,” the man muttered.

There were similar conversations going on all around us. Benjamin was hearing them as much as I was, and his face was drawn in a grim frown.

“We’re going to lose people,” Benjamin said. By his side, Margaret looked worried as well.

Sakura frowned. “I wish we could help.” She turned to me with a hopeful look in her eyes.

I considered things for a moment. We probably could help. Craig’s main draws right now were his gun and the fact that he was strong and looked confident. He’d leveraged that to assemble a team that would help him secure food and pretty women—either of which would draw more people to his side like flies to honey. That he rejected people would only make joining his club seem even more exclusive and appealing.

Humans naturally valued things based on how hard it was to obtain them. That was part of the reason so many fraternities and sororities made it a pain in the ass to join them. It meant their people would cherish their membership that much more.

“We’ll just have to match whatever Craig is offering,” I said.

Sakura folded her arms again. “You plan on collecting pretty women, too?”

I chuckled. “Not quite. I was planning on going on a food run to the local grocery store.”

“You would do that?” Margaret’s brows rose in surprise. “But there are monsters out there! The wildlife has turned terrifying. The cockroaches we’ve been fighting are just the beginning.”

“So I gather.”

Margaret filled me in on the few tales that had been spreading around about a massive squirrel someone had spotted looking out one of the windows. Apparently, that had scared enough people that they were disassembling the furniture and boarding up every window in sight—and reinforcing the doors.

They were even building a second, more defensible structure within the office itself, for everybody to sleep. I was pretty sure Benjamin was setting up a formal watch rotation. The law office was looking less like a workplace and more like a survival shelter with every passing hour.

Benjamin and Margaret were good at organizing people. The only thing I’d done was to lead people into fights. Getting them to do anything else sounded like more trouble than it was worth. I didn’t want to hold people’s hands, or patiently help them find the best way they could contribute to the collective.

The two lawyers warned me once again about the dangers of facing the unknown, but I’d planned on leaving the office soon, anyway. I didn’t plan on staying here forever, after all.

“Good luck. I don’t know if we have any supplies you think will help you, but if you see anything you want, it’s yours.” Ben clapped me on the shoulder as he offered me his hand.

When we parted, I turned to my companions. “So... I don’t know if—“

“I’m coming,” Sakura declared. She hefted her new baseball bat over her shoulder and met my gaze with a stern and steady look of her own—as though daring me to tell her to stay.

“I... I’d like to come too, if you don’t mind,” Bridget murmured with a hopeful twist of her lips. She twirled her blonde hair with one hand, which was in stark contrast to the tough face she’d worn just moments ago when getting rid of Craig.

“And you, Frank?” I asked.

Frank sighed. “I guess it beats moving furniture. Which is what I’d be doing if I stayed here.” He gestured to all the people in the law office, most of whom were hard at work, boarding up the windows and building more barricades.

“Grab whatever you think you’ll need from the office, though remember, it’s only a trip down the block.”

'Only a trip down the block' turned out to be entirely incorrect when we ventured outside. Crownhill had a modestly busy downtown area, where our office was, but something had changed with the integration. Now, there were endless blocks of urban sprawl. We'd never been a large city, but you'd never guess that, now.

Next to our office was... our office. Both sides of our office had a building that was similar in appearance from the outside, though after we kicked down the door to one of them, we discovered the insides were completely empty. What's more, most of the supporting structures were missing, so several of the buildings were collapsing in on themselves after only a few hours of existence.

"If nothing else, we have a massive supply of building material." Bridget poked a brick wall, and it fell over.

"We'll explore the place fully later," I said. "It looks like our trip to get food is going to be a longer journey than we thought."

The convenience store next door that Craig was taking his people to was just barely in sight. But I didn't want to run into him or his new gang of thugs out on the street, so we decided to head for the grocery store in the opposite direction. It was further, but there would probably be a greater selection of food. Plus, they would have shopping carts we could take—which would make hauling enough stuff back to make the trip worthwhile far easier.

We saw more oddities as we walked down the side of the street. The sidewalks were still around, but there was no confusing this with a stroll through downtown before the System. The sidewalk was cracked and misshapen in the regions between the duplicated buildings. After studying the sidewalk a little closer, I realized what was going on. It was like someone had copied the broad strokes of the immediate area and copied them repeatedly, like a poorly stretched image. Because they'd copied each chunk of land repeatedly, some buildings had been cut right in half. There were three buildings in a row that was supposed to be a coffee shop, one after another, but only one of them

was whole.

"How did we miss this happening?" Sakura asked.

"We weren't exactly peeking out the windows when we were fighting monsters," I grumbled.

Bridget shrugged. "I didn't sense a thing."

I shook my head, just as startled as everyone else. It seemed the System could simply cut and paste land without issue. I knew it had god-like powers, but to see that power used so indiscriminately across the landscape was something else.

I was more than a little concerned, though. This modification would have been much more seamless if it had been nothing more than adding sprawling plains or a patch of ground with a few trees on it, or the side of a mountain. But here? In the middle of a busy downtown street? The changes were obvious at a glance. Clearly, whatever the System was doing here hadn't been designed with modern cities in mind.

How much more chaotic were things in real cities like New York or Tokyo?

"There were a bunch of weird glowing lights. It was pretty cool," Frank said.

Sakura turned to look at him, mouth agape. "You saw it happening and didn't mention anything?"

Frank shrugged. "I hadn't finished my coffee yet. I thought I dreamed it all."

As we neared the grocery store, I heard a sound behind me that almost made me jump out of my skin. It was the distinctive *clacking* of claws against pavement, and I turned quickly to see a hedgehog-like monster walking toward us from the other side of the street. Its fur was dark and better suited to the wilderness than a city block, though its head was covered in thick red fuzz that didn't match the rest of its body at all. The fur almost resembled flames wrapping around the creature's head. It was cute... in a pudgy, colorful way.

"Carter..." Sakura began.

"I see it."

By now, all of us were staring at the thing monster across from us. It reminded me of the Rat Matriarch, and I had the sense that it was roughly as powerful as she had been. But I'd beaten the Rat Matriarch, and I'd gained several levels since then. In theory, a rematch between me and her would be completely one-sided.

I took aim and launched a Mana Bolt at the ground near the creature. It was in our way, and I certainly would not approach a creature as fearsome looking as this one willingly. The best thing would be for it to wander off on its own, and I planned to scare it a little to get it moving. My Mana Bolt struck the ground and tore a chunk out of the sidewalk, but the hedgehog didn't run.

Instead, the creature turned towards me with a snarl on its face. It didn't charge forward. Instead, it raised its open maw to point at me and unleashed a stream of fireballs at me.

"Split up!" I shouted.

Sakura followed me to the right, while Bridget and Frank went to the left. The monster kept me in its sights, and it was clear I was the one it was targeting with its fireballs.

When crossing paths with a monster, I had expected to face teeth and claws. Maybe another attack like the toxic bite ability the Rat Matriarch had, if I was truly unlucky. I hadn't planned for fire-breathing hedgehogs.

My heart pounded as I dodged each successive ball of fire. They were slow, but the sheer number of the things flying at me meant it was only a matter of time before I failed to dodge. One hit me square in the chest and knocked me backward, but I recovered immediately.

It turned out the fireballs weren't all that powerful. I should have guessed as much from how many the hedgehog was shooting and the level of power I sensed from it, but the individual fireballs were even weaker than my Mana Bolts. The one that hit me only singed my clothes and gave me a burn about equal to what I'd get if I ran my hand slowly over a candle. My skin was probably red, but it was not much worse than a sunburn. That meant we could simply ignore them and charge.

Checking my health points, I was only down around five percent from my maximum.

"Carter!" Sakura screamed in fear and terror that turned to relief and confusion. "You're... alright?"

I laughed. "Surprisingly so! Now, let's see if this thing is worth a level or two."

Once we realized the fireballs were mostly cosmetic, we rushed the beast and clubbed

it into the pavement. It was rather odd how quickly four previously mild-mannered office workers turned into cavemen. The fire-breathing hedgehog should have cut its losses and run the moment it realized its fireballs were of limited effect on us. Maybe it had been frying bugs up until now and hadn't realized how ineffective its attacks would be on something stronger, but it kept trying to kill us with those splashes of flame.

Frank gained a level for the fight, so that at least made it worthwhile. It should have been worth a lot of experience points, but those points had been split four ways, so nobody else received enough to gain a level.

The more interesting thing happened after the fight. The world sharpened by just a little. My limbs felt stronger, my body tougher, and my mana pool grew. At first, I thought I had leveled, but then I saw the others had gone through the same experience.

Sakura and Bridget both looked different, and a moment of study told me that each of them was a notch prettier than they'd been before, as well as considerably more athletic. Sakura's figure, in particular, was looking less like an office worker and more like a professional athlete. I poked myself in the gut and was surprised when my finger encountered something hard and toned just beneath my dirty undershirt. I didn't have a six-pack or anything, but a few more stat points, and that might not be an impossibility.

Frank squirmed a bit when he felt something strange. Grabbing the waistband of his pants, he pulled it out a bit and took a peek downstairs. What he saw apparently met with his approval. "Nice."

I was tempted to check myself, but Sakura was watching me a little too closely for me to be comfortable with that. She was studying my face, as though she intended to burn my current appearance into her memories. I hesitated to ask her if I had something in my teeth.

Instead, I checked my stats and found that every single one of them had increased by one. It didn't take long for me to remember the title the system had granted each of us: Blessed of the System. Every four hours, we'd get another point in every stat.

Perhaps this was the System's way of making sure everyone had a decent start. Those back in the office working on building defenses could get stronger just by surviving, even if they weren't yet willing to risk their lives for levels. I was pleased to note the progress counter on my Charisma Unleashed quest had jumped forward on its own. Either I'd done something charisma-worthy since getting the quest, or I was right in my assumption that Blessed of the System bolstered hidden stats, as well as regular ones.

Us people who didn't grow up with the System would still be far behind those who'd been born to it, but I was pretty certain superhuman strength, speed, and health would go a long way to bolstering everyone's confidence. The System's arrival would have been a joyous occasion if this had been everything—though I suppose losing most of the planet's population and the destruction of our way of life did tend to put a damper on things.

Still, it seemed like there were some positives hidden within the tragedy. And I hoped if people survived, these changes would continue to improve our odds of survival.

"Alright, since nobody here knows how to skin a giant hedgehog monster, it looks like we're going to continue on to the grocery store," I said.

Frank gave the dead monster a kick. I'd recovered my knife from my broken makeshift spear and was back to using it as a pocketknife again. Frank borrow it and tried to use it to gut the giant hedgehog, but he gave up when he realized he'd have to stick his arms wrist-deep in the creature's guts.

Wiping the blade on the hedgehog's fur, he handed it back to me. "Never thought I'd say

this, but I'd rather have cans of tuna fish."

And so our trip continued. We came across more than a few human bodies, too—a small group of whom looked like the office workers we'd left behind.

"These might be the people Benjamin and Margaret said they sent out as scouts." I bent over to examine the bodies while the others stood back. There was a lot of blood, but each of them only had one major gash in the neck. Strange. The cuts on their necks were relatively small and clean, with a few or no other wounds on their bodies. I would have expected a monster to be a little messier taking them down.

"Try their wallets," Sakura suggested. "If they have IDs, we can take them back to Margaret and Benjamin and ask them to confirm if they're the people that they sent out."

That was a good idea, so I checked their pockets. It didn't look like anybody else was willing to, so I was stuck doing the dirty work. Except that when I went to check their pockets, there was nothing there.

"They don't have wallets," I said, standing back up.

Perhaps they'd decided that carrying a wallet was pointless after the apocalypse, but these guys had left hours ago, when the apocalypse had just started. I was pretty sure old habits died hard enough that they wouldn't forget something they usually carried with them everywhere.

I still carried not just my wallet but my cell phone, as well, and that was little more than a paperweight.

I checked for phones, too, and found nothing. And now that I was looking for stolen stuff, I realized none of them had on any watches or coats, and one of the bodies was missing a pair of boots. There was only one kind of monster that could so cleanly dispatch someone and then steal their stuff afterward.

“We need to be careful. There might be looters about,” I warned everyone. “I’m pretty sure these guys were stabbed in the neck. Stick together. I want eyes in every direction.”

Frank agreed to watch our rear, and the girls took up watch to either side. We had a few scares, but each time they turned out to be nothing more than leaves on a tree or a gust of wind. We didn’t even encounter another monster the rest of the way to the grocery store.

When we finally got to the grocery store, I quickly realized that we weren’t the first people to loot it. Now that I was thinking about it, the grocery store would have been open when the apocalypse began, which meant there had to have been a significant number of people inside it.

I tried the door, but someone had thought to lock it. In fact, there was something propped up against the inner door jamming the thing shut, so that even if we’d had the key, we wouldn’t be able to open the door.

I rapped on the glass. It was tough stuff and even with my enhanced strength I couldn’t punch through it.

“Let me.” Sakura volunteered. Hefting her baseball bat, she slammed it into the glass door, shattering it in one blow. Those extra points in strength were doing wonders for her.

Sakura strode over the broken glass with confidence, with Bridget on her heels.

Frank went next, and as he passed me, he gave me a pat on the shoulder. “Good luck keeping her happy, mate.”

“Maybe I should put some points into strength...” I muttered to myself. It would interfere with my build, which was mostly focused around Mana Bolt. I decided I might be forced to put a few points into Strength, whether I really wanted to, or not.

I followed Frank inside, only to find everyone standing just inside the entrance and staring further into the store.

There were plenty of signs that other people had been here recently. The shelves at the front of the store were a mess. Several of them had been dragged across the floor toward one corner of the store to form a makeshift barricade. But I wasn’t sure if any of the people who had made that barricade were still around.

The air was filled with the smell of blood, and it wasn’t coming from the meat aisle. There were five human corpses that I could see, and I was certain there were more up ahead that I couldn’t see. The people in the store had piled up debris to block the door and stop things from getting in, but when monsters came at them from within, it seems they weren’t able to break the windows to get out.

“The carts are over here,” I said. “Grab one and pile them full of everything a group of survivors should need—some carbohydrates, basic protein, and plenty of bottled water. Just grab ready-to-eat stuff, for now. I don’t think the office is outfitted for cooking.”

Everyone grabbed a cart. Four carts full of food wouldn't last more than a hundred people long. Maybe we could daisy-chain a dozen of them together. With Sakura's high strength stat, she could probably pull it without a problem.

"This place is so much creepier with the lights off," Bridget shivered.

"Just keep your eyes open and stay alert," I said.

"It really is creepy, though. I swear one of those bodies on the ground moved since the last time I looked at it," Sakura said.

I looked behind us. There was a body lying in the middle of the aisle. I remembered having to shift my cart around it, but as it was now, it was blocking the path we'd come through completely. To get back the way we'd come, we would need to move the body.

I approached cautiously, with Frank following close behind me, holding his nose the whole time.

Bridget and Sakura kept loading up the carts with water. Both women had started with two points less in strength than us guys, but somewhere over the last few levels, they'd pumped several more points into the stat and surpassed us. I'd been focusing on Intelligence to bolster my magic, and Frank had been going for Perception to pick up the examination skill we'd heard about that let a user see the levels of our potential enemies.

"It looks like a body," Frank said, still holding his nose. "Sure smells like one, too."

“It isn’t that bad,” I scoffed. “This guy had to have died recently.”

The body we were standing over was tall, probably well over six-feet if he’d been standing. He had a beer gut big enough to keep his body from lying flat, face down, and blood dripped down from a bite in his neck that showed what had killed him. I got a little closer and peered at the wound.

The bite was roughly the size of a human mouth, which meant it couldn’t have been anything too large—maybe something like those rats we fought had killed him. I had expected more giant cockroaches, but perhaps I’d underestimated how clean the grocery store kept its operation. There wasn’t a bug in sight, despite all the food.

“So what killed you...” I leaned over the body. Now that I was looking closely, the blood from his neck trailed along the ground behind him, almost as though he had dragged himself by his outstretched arms across the floor.

I looked at the corpse’s hands. They were bloody, and the nails were ground down to broken stubs, as if...

I hurried to take a step away, but the body moved faster than I had expected. A cold, clammy arm wrapped around my ankle and it lunged for me with its jaw wide, but I pointed my finger at its head and used Mana Bolt. The head exploded in a fountain of gore.

I wasn’t sure if blowing up its head was necessarily required to take out this kind of zombie, nor was I certain that their bites were infectious—though it certainly looked that way from the human mouth sized bite on its neck.

I wasn’t taking any chances. “Everyone, back away from the bodies!” I shouted.

Another body that hadn't been trying to kill me turned to look at the rest of the group. The dead woman's eyes were still open and staring, but there was no recognition in them. It was like a wild animal seeing its prey.

"Fuck!" Frank shouted as he jumped back.

Bridget shrieked, and Sakura picked up her bat.

Oddly enough, now that the corpses had turned into enemies, her fear of them had been completely replaced by anger, and she charged to my side with a wordless battle cry.

I pointed my hand at another zombie that was coming to life and blew its head off, just like the first. "Goddammit," I huffed, "it looks like we've got a zombie problem."

My team ran past zombies as fast as possible, smashing them apart with whatever they could lay their hands on. The violence echoed throughout the grocery store, making the place sound like a war zone. A zombie would stagger after us, but we quickly disposed of them before they could reach us.

You have slain [Newly Risen Zombie - Level 1] x3

Despite being disgusting and terrifying at first, the zombies turned out to be surprisingly weak. I calmed down after killing a few of them and checking over my notifications.

I wasn't sure if zombies were only as strong as giant cockroaches, or if it was because these people had been so low level before they died, but it only took one Mana Bolt to finish them. Seeing how easy killing them off was, I decided that instead of fleeing, we'd just cleanse the store and do our shopping after we'd put them all down.

As we worked our way deeper into the building, I noticed a couple of dead bodies lying near the stairs. These had been bitten just like the first. When I approached, they attacked—which was another point in favor of them being contagious.

"Everyone, be careful. If you aren't certain you can kill these things without getting bitten, let me take them out with a Mana Bolt," I ordered.

The zombies were rather slow—so slow that even an ordinary human could just walk away from them. The level one zombies barely had the coordination to stand. Their best tactic seemed to be to play dead, trying to surprise anyone who came to check on them. Now that we knew their trick, they stood little chance against us.

Bridget pushed an empty shelf on top of one zombie and jumped on top of the trapped undead monster, while Sakura jumped on their backs to pin them to the floor with her foot as she bashed their heads in with her bat.

Frank was a bit more cautious about taking the undead down than either of the ladies, so he threw things at the creatures from afar until they stopped moving. He had a surprisingly good throwing arm on him, though. The zombies he took down looked quite strange with frozen sausages sticking out of their eye sockets.

Truthfully, I was disappointed at how low their levels were. I might have leveled up if some of these zombies had been level three or four. By this point, I was barely earning any experience points at all. But it was worth wiping these things out when we finally figured out where the grocery store survivors had been hiding. They were tucked away

in a bathroom at the back of the store.

“All the zombies are dead now!” I yelled as I tapped on the door. “You guys can come out.”

“How do we know you aren’t a zombie?” A voice yelled out in reply.

“Did you hear any of those zombies talking?” I asked. “Because I didn’t. Trust me, I’m not a zombie.”

“Sounds like the kind of thing a zombie would say!”

Convincing everyone to come out proved to be quite difficult, but not impossible. Eventually, I got them to crack the door open enough that they could inspect me and see I was a living, flesh and blood human, just like them. At that point, they finally opened the door, and I could look inside.

A group of survivors sat huddled together, terrified of the monsters. We told them not to worry and brought them out to see that there was nothing to be afraid of.

The world had already fallen apart before they stepped foot outside. Most of them thought the zombie attack was an isolated incident, confined to this one supermarket, and had been certain help would come to wipe them out soon. I had to break the bad news to them.

“What are we supposed to do now, if nowhere is safe?” A worried woman asked. She had gray hair and was older, and reminded me a little of my grandmother before she

died.

She was right. Nowhere was safe for a bunch of level ones, though they did have a stat boost from Blessed of the System that would make them a bit harder to kill than ordinary people had been before the integration.

“There’s an office building where a bunch of survivors are grouping up. If you help us bring food there, I’m sure they’d be happy to take you in.” And just like that, I recruited people to push another twenty carts. It was a good thing, too, because my suggestion to use Sakura like a locomotive hadn’t gone over well.

Once they fully grasped the situation, the survivors thanked me profusely for saving their lives and helping them escape. I was just sorry there were no zombies left, since they could have used the levels. Then again, I doubt I could have coaxed them into leaving the bathroom, if there had been any zombies still about. They had a hard enough time just walking past the pools of blood.

Only about a third of them were useful when it came to collecting supplies. Most were too terrified to do anything but huddle together. But just having ten more hands to help us fill carts was a massive boon. The rest were only good for pushing carts—but on the way back, that was just what we needed.

Before long, we had emptied a good portion of the grocery store and were headed back to the office. The folks we’d saved at the store were exhausted and sweaty from carrying and hauling all the heavy stuff, but the work gave them all something to focus on—other than the fact that their world had changed forever. I made sure to remind my team how important this food was. This journey would keep many people from starving once we got back.

“Frank, let’s scout ahead. Bridget and Sakura can keep an eye on everyone,” I suggested.

Knowing how badly these people had reacted when faced with a few low-level zombies, the last thing I wanted to do was force them to confront some monster that was actually powerful. Frank was putting points into perception to get the Examine skill, so he could see just about everything, even in the shadows between buildings.

We spotted a few Scavenger Cockroaches, most of which I killed with my Mana Bolt.

“There are the bodies from before,” Frank said, pointing ahead. Some level two cockroaches had been nibbling on them just minutes ago. That was probably how they’d reached level two in the first place.

“Let’s move them into the alley. I don’t want the survivors from the store seeing them.”

So, we dragged the bodies aside, disrupting a few rats while we were at it. They were all low level, just like the first group of rats I’d killed, but they seemed a lot less impressive. Now that I was killing them with just one Mana Bolt, I realized they were only about knee height. Sure, the Rat Matriarch had been much bigger, but maybe these things weren’t so terrifying, after all.

But I suppose that’s the major benefit of being able to kill something just by pointing at it.

My Mana Bolt hadn’t gotten any more powerful, but with my swelling reserves combined with my steadily growing Caster proficiency, I’d become able to push each shot to its full

potential. It wasn't the ideal solution, considering how much less efficient Mana Bolt got when I pumped it up with too much power, but if I ran into stronger enemies, a magical punch wouldn't do it. I needed something more like a magical gun. I wasn't there yet, but maybe I would be with a few more days work.

Still, all the things we ran into were fairly low level—which suggested I had been leveling even faster than the creatures crawling through the city. That was a bit of a relief, but also somewhat worrying. What about the forest? Maybe there were creatures beyond the city limits whose levels were skyrocketing with every passing hour. And where had the Rat Matriarch gone to when she'd run off?

"Something's wrong," Frank muttered as he turned abruptly, just as we were tossing the last of the bodies in the alley where they'd be out of sight of the store's survivors, who would be passing by here soon.

Bending my ear, I heard Sakura shouting something with urgency. With his high perception, Frank probably heard what she was saying a lot more clearly than I did.

"What is it?"

"I think they're under attack," Frank replied.

We ran around the corner, and sure enough, Sakura and Bridget stood over a body. With a heavy heart, I realized it was the older woman who'd reminded me of my grandmother. Next to her was a man with a bloody golf club. He had a scowl on his face, and his weapon was locked with Sakura's like they were crossing swords.

There were two thugs, each dressed in a pair of stolen boots and coats. Beneath that garb, they wore bright orange jumpsuits that I recognized from Crownhill's local prison.

Of course. If the police station had been disarmed, the prison guards probably had been as well. A prison break here or there was natural with an apocalypse on the way.

“Out of the way,” the man yelled. He was big, burly, and two heads taller than Sakura.

One shove should have sent Sakura flying to one side by all rights. But Sakura had been putting points into strength, and her physical power defied reality. When the burly murderer shoved her, Sakura shoved him back—and it was the burly prisoner who stumbled backwards.

“Fucking hell. I thought you said these people were easy pickings, just like those law office guys,” the murderer’s companion said.

I realized we’d probably found the culprits that had murdered the people whose bodies we’d hauled out of the way a few minutes ago. We would have to watch out for more of their ilk in the coming days. There had been a few hundred prisoners in that facility. Assuming even only a fraction of them were the violent type, they would gain levels the fastest. I bet the prison’s guards had been some of the first casualties of the integration.

The prisoners here were violent and opportunistic, which meant they’d be in trouble eventually. While I still intended to set up camp outside the city where I wouldn’t have to fight other people for resources, I wasn’t about to let criminals terrorize my hometown.

Sakura and Bridget were overpowering the two they were fighting, which meant we had the advantage in levels.

“Let’s go,” the murderer said. “Time to bail.” Glancing our way, he saw us rushing toward them.

“Split up,” I shouted to Frank, and he peeled off to block their escape while I headed straight for them.

“Out of our way!” One of them swung his golf club, expecting to swat me aside when I was in range. But I had no intention of getting into a fistfight with the guy. His strength stat had probably been higher than mine before the integration—hell, it was probably far higher than mine, now.

So, instead, I just pointed my finger at his forehead and unleashed a highly charged Mana Bolt.

The man’s head whipped back like he’d been struck with a rock. His head didn’t explode like a melon, but he stumbled backwards. Before he could recover, I followed the attack up with another Mana Bolt.

“Fuck off!” He shouted as he righted himself, swinging his golf club wildly and spraying the old lady’s blood everywhere. He must have thought there was someone invisible hitting him in the head. I replied by shooting him with Mana Bolt again. And again.

The fight was practically over when Sakura, Bridget, and I corralled the two murders.

“W-wait! We didn’t mean to kill anyone!” the murderer with the golf club said. His words were slurred and he wobbled back and forth as he struggled to stand. Blood leaked from his eyes, ears, and mouth. All those Mana Bolts had probably given him multiple concussions. He tossed his weapon aside when he realized how bloody it was and tried to give Sakura his most charming smile.

She turned to me, and I shook my head. I pointed my finger right at his eye. With so little distance between us, this one hit something much more vulnerable than his thick skull.

Your Caster proficiency has increased to 5.

That attack finally exhausted the last of the murderer's health points. The man dropped dead, blood and brain matter oozing from his empty eye socket. His body twitched for a moment until Sakura brought her baseball bat down on his head.

Realizing we would not show him any mercy, the other prisoner jumped to his feet. He sized the three of us up and must have decided that Bridget looked to be the weakest out of our group, so he gave her a shove as he tried to break free of our circle. A moment later, he ran face-first into Frank's table leg, which he'd been carrying propped up over his shoulder and now swung to intercept the fleeing prisoner.

You have slain [Henchman - Level 4]!

You have slain [Psychopath - Level 6]!

Congratulations! You have advanced to level 7!

"Y-you killed them!" A woman gasped in horror from our shopping cart baggage train.

"Yeah, just like they would have done to you," I replied. I felt a knot forming in my stomach.

I'd just killed two people. Not giant cockroaches. Not rats or monsters roaming the streets. I'd killed two human beings. Those were dangerous thoughts, and not ones I could afford to contemplate at the moment. So I locked them in a little box in the back of my mind. If I was going to puke and cry over it, I was going to have to wait to do it when people weren't depending on me to get them to safety.

"I... but..." the woman stuttered, unable to find words with the smell of blood in the air.

Calming down the survivors after that little episode took far longer than the fight itself. Everyone was screaming, crying, or some combination thereof. It was annoying, mostly because we'd cleared away the bodies earlier to make sure they didn't see something like this.

It took me a few minutes of reflection to figure out what was ticking me off.

It was their attitude. They'd survived the apocalypse and defied the odds to remain in the land of the living, so far. Those two criminals would have killed them if we had let them. And yet here they were, clinging to old sensibilities that would get them killed if they hung on to them any longer. What were they thinking?

Perhaps I'd started them down the wrong path. I'd tried to shield these folks from our new reality. No longer. If there were bodies on the street, they'd just have to learn to walk over them. If there were monsters in our path, then they'd have to fight them alongside us.

But by some ironic twist of fate, the rest of our journey back to the office was entirely peaceful. There wasn't so much as a single rat or a giant cockroach for the survivors behind us to fight. I allocated my stat points while we walked, putting three in

Intelligence and one into Perception.

“Ha, I think I see Craig and his crew coming back from the convenience store. They look a little worse for wear.” Frank squinted into the distance.

I couldn't see that far, but Frank's perception was at nine, so I wasn't surprised that he could see things I couldn't. Perhaps next level up I'd put two points into Perception instead of just one.

We returned to the office to find it much the same as we'd left it. Benjamin and Margaret were beside themselves with joy at our safe return, and everyone else eyed the carts of food hungrily. The new survivors were welcomed with open arms—not surprising, considering what they were bringing with them—and the survival group expanded by quite a bit.

“Maybe we should stay here a while, Carter?” Sakura suggested. Quite a few of the other survivors were treating us like conquering heroes just for braving the great outdoors and bringing back supplies.

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

I still wanted to get my supplies and set up base in my survival shelter. I'd spent an awful lot of time and money setting that up before the integration, after all. But maybe staying at the office for a little while longer wouldn't hurt. After all, if things really went south again, we could always flee to safety. It would be good to keep the mountaintop bunker as a secret shelter.

It didn't really hit me that we'd just killed two human beings until we were walking back into the office. Wasn't I supposed to be disgusted with myself and puking in an alley

somewhere? I'd just killed someone, after all.

That would have been a horrible thought just a few days ago, but somehow it wasn't hitting me like it should. Maybe it was the adrenaline. Or maybe my Blessed of the System title was keeping it from really hitting me. That would explain why Frank seemed unbothered by his role in things, as well. In the end, I decided my current train of thought didn't have a destination, so I tabled such thoughts until later.

When I talked to Benjamin next, he had an exciting discovery to share with me.

“Carter, look at this!” He gestured to the empty air in front of him.

“I don't see anything.”

“Oh. Right. System screen. Here, let me share what I'm seeing with you.” Benjamin made a few obscure gestures, and suddenly the air before him lit up and a screen popped into existence. It looked different from mine, like it had been pulled from a spreadsheet. In fact, looking closer, I realized it looked exactly like a spreadsheet. In contrast, my System screen was reminiscent of a plain text web RPG. These screens must have been customized for the individual meant to interact with them.

“How'd you do that?” I asked as I ducked around to look at Benjamin's screen with him.

“We've been experimenting while you were out adventuring. There are a lot of features on these menus. One of our people even found a calculator. This thing even has an app store! And to think I was sad my phone stopped working. I'll show you how to access those menus later. For now, this is what I want you to check out.”

New Quest Available!

Establish a settlement - Your group meets all suitable requirements for establishing a settlement for the class: shelter.

Establishing a shelter will enable the purchase of shields, training equipment and allow the purchase of non-combat jobs through the profession system.

To establish a shelter, you must fend off all who would oppose the establishment of your shelter—both sentient and monster. Reward for this quest is a Settlement Obelisk in the geographic center of your shelter.

“You want to try this quest?” I asked.

“Many of these folks are very hopeful about that line there—Allows the purchase of non-combat jobs through the profession system.” Benjamin pointed to the second bullet point before us.

“It looks like you’re going to need to fight to complete the quest, though,” I cautioned.

Benjamin nodded. “That’s why I wanted to bring it up to you. We need people willing to fight, and after Craig took most of those from us, we need every warrior we can get. I know your group of four has already helped us so much already, but I can promise to make it worth your while if you help us again.”

Settlement Owner - The Settlement Owner receives a flat tax on transactions that occur within the settlement under their control for so long as they maintain control over the Obelisk. The default tax rate for settlements is 10% of all market transactions.

"That is the position I'm offering you, just as stated. If you help with the quest, we'll make you the official settlement owner, and that bonus will be yours," Ben said.

I raised an eyebrow. "You don't want that position yourself?"

Benjamin chuckled. "Admittedly, yes. But I've read the fine print. To be a Settlement Owner, you have to be strong enough to defend your settlement. While I've done my best to gain levels, you've done a far better job than anyone here except for Craig. Since we don't want him in charge, it's only naturally that you be the settlement owner. The person who takes this position will have a lot of power over us, and we want whoever it is to be sane and stable."

"Basically, you want me as a figurehead," I summarized.

Benjamin nodded. "Essentially, yes. A figurehead and someone to scare our enemies off. And in exchange, you'll get 10% of our tax revenue, whatever that ends up coming out to."

I thought about it for a moment, pondering the offer. Benjamin must have sensed my hesitation, so he continued.

"I have the Examine skill, and besides Craig, you've got the highest level of anyone I've seen. And I sure as hell am not asking Craig if he wants the position."

“And what about these monsters? Are you sure we can handle them?”

Benjamin leaned in close and whispered. “That’s where I have a little secret... but it’s in my car.”

“Your car?”

“I like to head to the shooting range after work. I’ve got two rifles in there, both much higher gauge than Craig’s little pistol.” Benjamin said. “You saw how many levels that little thing gave him. Imagine what we could do with a pair of real guns?” Benjamin said with an eager gleam in his eyes. “I’ll take one while we complete the quest, and you can use the other. Even if Craig is higher level than you now, I’m sure he won’t be by the time we run out of ammo. Outleveling him will keep him from making trouble. And if he makes trouble anyway, you’re more than welcome to use the rifle to... maintain order.”

“You sure you want me to have the other gun? Not your wife, Margaret?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how good Craig’s perception skill was, but I knew he had the Examine skill, which meant it was at least ten. I didn’t want him to hear about anyone’s plot to assassinate him.

Benjamin shook his head. “We talked already. We’ll have plenty of time after the quest is won. Besides, nobody here will leave the office. The parking garage is nearly half a block away. You’d have to go retrieve the guns, or they’ll just sit there uselessly.”

“Have you spoken with the police station? They said their guns were all broken. I don’t know how Craig got his working.”

Benjamin nodded. “We’ve been chatting with them. I’ve told them about Craig, and some of the guys here have a few theories—theories we’re working on confirming with a little good old fashion corporate espionage. There’s a special title you have to earn before a gun works for you, and even then, it takes a bit of fiddling. But we’ve been spying on Craig and know he’s taken his gun apart and put it back together multiple times. That has to have something to do with it. If we can figure out his trick, we’ll be catching up to his level before we know it.”

I was certain that the gun was the main reason Craig was at a higher level than me. Even my Mana Bolt didn’t have as much of a punch to it as a bullet, which was the main reason I’d been careful not to initiate a shootout with Craig. But if I could bridge the level advantage he had, he wouldn’t be able to intimidate us any longer.

And the thought of doing so using his own trick was too good of an idea to pass up. I could hardly wait to see the look on his face.

“What if I end up using up all your ammo?”

“If there are as many jobs in this profession store as I’ve been led to believe, I’m betting at least one of them involves casting lead into bullets,” Benjamin replied.

I licked my lips. Doing this really would tie myself to these survivors. Did I want that? I glanced back at Sakura, Bridget, and Frank, still being thanked like heroes—just as I’d been a minute ago.

“Alright, Benjamin. I’m in.”

Benjamin clapped me on the shoulder. “You won’t regret this.”

Ben was important enough to be able to park his car fairly close to the office building. The thing we called a parking garage was a tiny underground affair, and barely worthy of the name before the integration, but with the System pasting four more identical garages so close to it that they blended into one another, it was about the size of what you might expect to see in a real city. Even the cars had been copied, though there was something off about the replicas. The numbers on the license plates were blurred bits of nonsense—like they'd been replicated by someone who didn't know how to read them.

The hood of one of the duplicated cars was open, and a brief glimpse inside showed only a mess of wires and tubes all connected to one another, as though their only purpose was to replicate the appearance of complex mechanisms and not the inner workings of a functional car. When I tried one of the locks, it was frozen shut—and not frozen, as in locked. It was frozen as though there was no lock at all, just a groove in the shape of a latch carved out of the metal. The actual latch didn't work.

It was more evidence pointing towards the idea that the integration hadn't been made with advanced technology and complex machinery in mind. If this had been a vast swath of farmland or wilderness, the duplicate areas would have been fine. With automobiles and city blocks, cut-and-paste didn't work so well.

Once we identified the real parking garage, I just needed to find the black Porsche. I was never a big car buff, but I knew a luxury car when I was staring at one.

"That one is probably it," I pointed at the most expensive car in sight.

"That's my father's spare car. I was borrowing it. It's this way," Sakura led me in the complete opposite direction. "I've run into Benjamin and Margaret before in the parking lot."

Once again, I was thankful that I'd brought Sakura along. Otherwise this would have taken a lot longer than it should.

Bridget gave me a pat on the back. "That's a Cadillac, Carter... not exactly a sports car."

"They all look the same to me," I grumbled.

The key fob worked, battery powered remote and all. I clicked the button and the lights flashed, confirming that this was indeed the car we were looking for. There were no zombies, rats, or cockroaches in our way, and for a moment I debated driving the car back to the office and parking it on the side of the road.

But then reality sank in—a sports car was of limited utility after the end of the world. If I was going to park something in front of the office, I'd want a truck with four-wheel drive. Perhaps I'd ask around the office and get some keys. Or, failing that, just check the piles of clothes laying around the office from the people who didn't survive the integration.

I retrieved the pair of rifles from the trunk and was surprised at just how much ammunition Ben had back there. Just how long did he plan on spending at the shooting range before the Apocalypse?

Feeling curious, I picked up one of the loaded magazines and stuck it into the rifle. I was by no means a gun nut, but having been told by someone I trusted that an apocalypse was on its way and *not* taking at least a few lessons on how to use a firearm would have been stupid.

When I had it loaded and the safety off, I pointed it out the nearby window facing away from the city and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. I checked to confirm there was a

round in the chamber and that the safety was off and tried again—it didn't budge, I knew I hadn't messed up loading and shooting the thing.

"Busted." I shook my head.

"You check the safety?" Bridget asked.

I nodded before tossing the gun to her so she could try it for herself.

Sure enough nothing happened. "Huh," she muttered, "feels almost like a jam."

"You want to try, Sakura?" I offered her the rifle.

Sakura stuck to her bat. "I don't really know how to use those things," she admitted, shying away from the gun.

I chuckled. "Don't worry. I'll teach you later... assuming we can get them working, that is." I looked over at our blonde companion. "Or maybe Bridget will." From the familiar way Bridget held the gun, I suspected she could teach Sakura even better than I could.

We returned to the office a few minutes later. I spotted a single cockroach scurrying out of the way, and I sent a Mana Bolt after it. But that was it for our trip. I suspected the monsters below our level were avoiding us, at this point, and a walk down the street was about as safe as it had been before the integration.

I'm sure those grocery store shoppers we'd rescued would probably disagree.

When Ben said he was spying on Craig, I had underestimated the degree to which he was making that happen. I'd expected a few people with high perception standing near the door and hoping to catch a word or two, or someone standing by the stairwell peering into his old office—not that he was there very often, now that he'd moved into Sakura's office.

People had finally started overcoming their fear enough to wander the office freely. Some even started hunting cockroaches in the basement for some easy early levels. At that point, Ben had gotten it in his head to build a device to keep an eye on Craig, and Ben had created something pretty sophisticated.

One of the offices above us had been the headquarters of a construction company. Even though they were doing office work, they weren't too far from their roots and had plenty of hand tools. Someone even had a hand-cranked drill, which had saved a lot of time reinforcing the walls with the furniture.

There were plenty of mirrors in the bathroom to disassemble, and some of the old printers had even spit out a couple of prisms after being killed. Turns out your average office worker could be pretty creative when it came to making things out of scraps—especially when procrastinating other tasks that they didn't want to do. Unfortunately, for many average Joes and Josephines, what they didn't want to do were combat related tasks, like clearing out the giant bugs in the basement.

Still, I saw that more folks had started leveling down there than before. Even better, a few of Craig's lackeys had come crawling back when they realized we had real food and they'd fought a bunch of giant rats over a few bags of potato chips, protein powder, and energy drinks.

I even noticed a few folks from my office, who had left Sakura for the supposed safety that Craig had offered them. I was tempted to turn them away, since they'd turned their

backs on me and Sakura. But then I realized I didn't really want to be the one managing the shelter—and making that declaration would force me into a management position.

I saw how busy Ben and Margaret were. Keeping this many people in line was a full-time gig, and if I committed to it, I knew I'd hardly have any freedom at all—let alone the time to level. Ben really had picked the best role for me, as the Settlement Owner didn't actually need to do anything unless there was a monster attack.

So, taking a page out of Sakura's book, I ignored the issue and let them handle it. Instead, I met up with Bridget who was taking apart the two rifles next to a pair of rough-looking older men who were peering through the spyglass apparatus Ben had drilled through the wall to spy on Craig.

"Alright, so the first thing we noticed is that he takes that gun of his apart pretty frequently," one of the men said. He grinned at Bridget. "Speaking of which, you're pretty good at taking those rifles apart, girly."

Bridget smiled. "I used to help my pops take apart his guns when I was little. He was fond of target shooting, but ammo eventually got too expensive. When his health problems hit, it was either give up hunting or give up on his medical bills." She sighed. "And that was the end of seeking out a ten-pointer to hang on the wall."

"Bummer. I know what you mean, though. The price of ammunition has gone through the roof!" The man chuckled. "Well, I guess there's nobody to charge for bullets these days."

His companion turned to me. "Maybe you and your friends can bust into the gun store down the road. There's bound to be some good pickings, there."

I nodded. "If you can figure out Craig's trick to get these things working, then that's just what we'll do."

Bridget and the two men fiddled with the rifles, disassembling them completely. Sakura and I weren't going to stand around the whole time, so we went out on another grocery run and killed a few more zombies. I didn't gain any levels, but Sakura did. And despite not having gained a level, I still crossed over 20 Intelligence when the four-hour mark ticked past and added one to all my stats.

Congratulations on reaching an Intelligence milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with an intelligence skill book or upgrade an existing skill!

Choose an Intelligence skill book!

- **Book of Fireball (Common) - Generates a ball of fire containing fire mana which can be thrown at targets.**
- **Book of Barrier (Common) - Generates a flat circular energy barrier that covers one square meter. It deflects incoming attacks at the cost of expending mana.**
- **Book of Deflect (Common) - Redirects the next incoming projectile when cast. Usable once every ten seconds.**
- **Upgrade Mana Bolt to Mana Blast (Uncommon) - This skill replaces Mana Bolt with a more powerful, enhanced neutral mana attack.**

I looked through the list of skill books. Fireball was tempting, at least until I remembered how easy the Fire Squirrel had been to defeat. Clearly, Fireballs weren't all they were

cracked up to be—especially against targets with high vitality.

That left the choice between Deflect, Barrier, and Mana Blast. Upgrading Mana Bolt would make the attack more powerful in a way that leveling my Caster proficiency couldn't, but in the end I decided to go with Deflect.

My reasoning was simple. Craig had a gun, and I was pretty sure he'd been thinking about shooting me in the back of the head the last time we'd met. Maybe next time he'd do just that. When he did, he'd probably expect to take me by surprise. Having this spell would prevent that.

Barrier sounded like it could do the same thing, but only if I knew from which direction the attack was coming. Even though Barrier would be more versatile, the risk of dying to an ambush from a direction I wasn't expecting to be attacked was just too high to take a shield over the power to completely mitigate the disadvantage of being caught off guard.

With my life on the line, I had to go with the safest choice. So, I selected Deflect, and the menu closed a moment later.

I thought about using the spell, and just like Mana Bolt it activated with a thought. Having it active consumed a tiny amount of mana, but not enough to keep me from regenerating to my maximum. I would probably keep it active permanently—unless I was trying to regenerate mana as quickly as possible.

"I just hit ten strength," Sakura said, grinning.

"You get skill choices?" I asked.

Sakura nodded. "Three of them. All common grade skill books. Think I should take the ability or the skill book? If I took the book, you might be able to use it."

I shook my head. "It's a strength skill book, which means the skill probably scales off strength, and yours is higher than mine. Besides, I'm not going to steal the fruits of your labor. But if you want to share your descriptions of the skills, I'll help you choose which one to take."

Sakura read her skills aloud and I listened. One was a skill that let the user jump higher, while another let them hit harder. The third skill reinforced the wielders weapon every time it was used.

"Seems to me like you can already jump pretty damn high," I said. When skipping, Sakura glided through the air like a gazelle, propelling herself forward at speeds worth a medal. Her physical stats were noticeably higher than mine. "And I've seen you with that bat. I've yet to see something you couldn't bash." I paused, pursing my lips. "But if you found something that needed a harder bash than you can already give, your weapon would probably shatter in your hands."

"Third choice it is," Sakura said, nodding.

And so it was settled. Sakura glanced at her bat as a dull crimson glow ran along its length. The small cracks that had started forming down the shaft vanished in an instant, and the wood grain shone with inner light. It turned denser and tougher before the light within faded and left the bat changed for the better. I wasn't sure how to describe it, but the entire thing just looked a bit more durable somehow.

"Neat trick."

After my initial push, levels had started coming slower. Maybe it was because I was higher level than most of the things in the city I could fight, or maybe it was because I wasn't being pushed as hard as I had been in those early fights against the Rat Matriarch.

I wasn't quite sure why, but something inside of me itched. I jumped at the slightest noise and fired a Mana Bolt at rustling leaves or wavering branches. It was like a part of me was just waiting for the next foe to rear its head. I suppose that was a good attitude to have in a survival situation like this, though I worried that prolonged exposure to this kind of environment was the sort of thing that gave people PTSD. We were going to need a lot of psychiatrists once the dust from the apocalypse finally settled.

Sakura spotted the local clinic, which was surprisingly closer to us than it used to be. The place was a mess. If the undead had been bad at the grocery store, here it seemed like they'd faced a full-blown epidemic.

The clinic was a large one-story brick and mortar building with a parking lot in the front and another behind it. Like many things in Crownhill, it was bigger than some tiny one room bloodwork testing place, but not big enough to be considered a real hospital.

A pair of ambulances were parked in the rear, neither of which were operable. There appeared to be thick slashes through the tires, one had a smashed windshield, while the other had burn marks along its entire length. It sagged at an odd angle, with the front left tier clearly out of action, and the other was up on blocks with the only good tire on it only halfway on.

Whoever had been working here had worked hard through the apocalypse and braved the streets to save people. Maybe they were still saving folks. I'd seen a few people on the streets and invited them to join Ben and Margaret.

There had even been a few people trying to flee by car, not that they seemed to be making much progress. Lots of people had crashed their cars when the System plucked them right out of the driver's seat for their integration. There were enough wrecks on the street that the roads weren't all that usable, which made the fact that someone had been taking those ambulances around even more remarkable.

Unfortunately, whoever had been doing so had their good works interrupted by a few undead. I wasn't sure if these were previous patients, nurses, or just people who didn't care about being brought back to life after the sweet release of death. But there were at least a dozen of them here, shambling around in the parking lot as they plowed face-first into windows and doors.

A few bore heavy wounds, which was a clear sign that somebody had thought to fight back. A couple of the undead were actually re-dead, lying in heaps on the ground, but enough were up and walking about that nobody was making it out of that clinic without a rescue party.

"These zombies can actually walk," Sakura noted, pointing her bat at the shambling undead.

"So it seems. I would guess they're a higher level than the newly risen undead we faced at the store."

Sakura snorted. "They're slow."

"Wanna make this a contest?" I asked. "I'm guessing they're level four."

"What's the winner get?" Sakura licked her lips.

I grinned. "If I win, I'm telling everyone we meet that you're my sidekick, not my boss."

"Hmm. Fine. And if I win, you have to give me a prize," Sakura said.

"Deal. Anything I have to give is yours." I didn't have anything on me I wasn't already willing to give to Sakura if she asked me for it. My phone was worthless, as was my wallet and the money in it. Even the clothes on my back weren't worth all that much—not when there were piles of them lying everywhere.

We snuck up on the zombies as they shambled aimlessly in the parking lot. I was far lighter on my feet than should have been possible, as was Sakura. I crept behind her and admired the graceful way she glided across the pavement without a sound. Those extra stat points in agility just from surviving this long were doing wonders.

My whole body felt like it had undergone a transformation. It was like I'd spent months doing nothing but eating right and working out, and now I was in the best shape of my life. The two of us had practically run to the clinic, and yet my heartbeat was as steady as ever. A jog that would have winded me before, barely got my blood pumping.

I could tell Sakura felt the same as I did. She wanted to push her new body to the limit, just like I did. She could have stayed back at the office with Bridget, or the others as they gathered supplies, or otherwise prepared to survive the apocalypse. But instead, she was here and hungry for more levels.

Having the best ranged weapon of the two of us, I was the first to open fire. My target was one of the more impressive zombies. In life, he'd been a tall man in good shape, with thick muscles that reminded me of Craig. The jersey he wore belonged to a local college football team, and I gave him even odds of being a player, instead of just a fan.

Someone had tried to behead him already, and there was a deep gouge in his neck that went all the way to the bone. All the blood and dangling flesh made it hard to make out the weapon that had been used, but it seemed to be a kitchen knife. After a second, closer look, I could say with confidence that it had been a kitchen knife.

I knew, because the kitchen knife was still stuck between his clavicle and his neck, pressed against the vertebrae. Dried blood caked his entire side. I planned to finish the job with my attack, and so with a steady hand I shot my Mana Bolt at the knife in his neck.

My attack landed perfectly, and the sudden kinetic attack drove the knife the rest of the way through the undead's spinal cord. He dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, the head still blinking as it rolled across the ground.

You have slain [Zombie - Level 4]!

"Beheading them works," I muttered. "Also, it looks like I win our bet." I would have to double check on that head and see if it was still dangerous.

A few zombies turned at the sound. Their sight must not have been particularly good, because Sakura and I were barely taking cover behind. The two of us crouched behind a car as we watched the small horde of undead.

Sakura's tactic was far more direct.

"Hyaaaaa!" She screamed, catching the attention of all the zombies in the parking lot. She charged into their midst, swinging her baseball bat with reckless abandon and

shattering skulls left and right. Then, she used a new ability of her own.

A brilliant red glow flowed down the length of her bat. While her new skill could strengthen her weapons out of battle, it could also be used during battle to give the weapon an extra durability boost for a particularly heavy-handed blow. And heavy handed it was. Sakura was truly throwing all of her strength into her attack. If she hadn't picked up that new skill, I'm sure she would have shattered her bat against the first zombie skull she splattered.

Her bat struck one undead's head, and it exploded in a fountain of gore. Its melon was simply gone, turned into chips of skull and a fine bloody mist. Another came for her with snarling jaws, but she'd put points into agility as well. Its teeth snapped on nothing but empty air, and a second later her baseball bat smashed the undead in the back of its skull,, crushing it just like she had the first one.

By now, every zombie in the parking lot knew where she was and had started shambling towards her. But that was just what Sakura wanted. It meant she wouldn't have to bother chasing them down.

Since there was no more point in trying to be subtle—not with Sakura drawing all the zombies towards her—I leaped from hiding and started firing off Mana Bolts left and right.

You have slain [Zombie - Level 3] x 3!

Congratulations, you have advanced to level 8!

The fight was over as quickly as it started, and our grinding from earlier paid off as we finally got those levels we'd been waiting for. At level seven, Sakura was quickly

catching up to me, and would probably have the highest level of anyone back on our side of the office shelter.

I dropped three stat points into Intelligence, bringing that stat's total up to twenty three. But the last point I saved for Perception, since it was just shy of ten.

Congratulations on reaching a Perception milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with an intelligence skill book!

Choose a Perception skill book!

- **Book of Analyze (Common) - Allows the user to identify items and objects. This provides information about their quality, value, and uses in crafting. This is an ideal skill for scavengers, gatherers, and job-focused individuals.**
- **Book of Examine (Common) - Allows the user to identify people and enemies. This provides information about the target's currently equipped class title and their combat level. This is an ideal skill for hunters and warriors.**

There were only two options available for Perception—one clearly geared for fighters and the other intended for workers. I was certainly doing a lot more fighting than I was foraging, and I didn't expect that to change. Still, it would be smart for people with lower combat abilities to pick up the Analyze skill. I could see myself bringing along a weaker person on these trips outside the shelter for that ability alone.

I knew instantly upon reading them that this was the skill I'd been hearing about. It was the one that sent a tingle up my spine when Craig looked at me, and it was the one that had allowed the lawyer in our party to identify the rat with the highest level when we'd fought it. One thing was clear, I needed this skill.

"So, quite a few of those zombies I killed were level 3, just like I guessed," Sakura said smugly. "I know the one you killed was level 4, but we never specified which zombie we were betting on."

"Let me guess, you're arguing that you won?" I raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "I guess we both won, in a sense," Sakura said. "So we both should get our prizes."

"You really want to be my sidekick that bad, huh?" I chuckled and received a playful punch in the arm.

I had to hide my wince. Sakura had put a lot of points into strength and she hadn't quite adjusted to how strong she was. Some of those points she'd just received must have gone into strength, as well. I'd have to put some more points into vitality just to keep up with her.

"No," Sakura pouted, "I just want my prize."

I didn't have much of value on me, and my office clothes were little more than rags. I was wondering what exactly Sakura thought I had to give her.

She wrapped one arm around my waist and pulled me close. Then she reached her other hand up around the back of my neck and pulled my head down until my lips met hers.

Her skin was soft and warm, and her eyes twinkled with a light and a love of life I'd only caught glimpses of once or twice, in all the time I'd spent working for her. Her tongue brushed against mine and I felt a tingle run down my spine. She broke off the kiss almost as quickly as she'd started it. Stepping back, her eyes darting to the ground as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"S-sorry, Carter. W-was that too much? I don't want to make things awkward. If it was too much, we can just pretend it never—" Sakura began to say, but I cut her off by pulling her in for another kiss.

Our lips locked again, and I breathed in her scent. Despite the carnage around us, she somehow smelled lovely. I wasn't sure how long that moment lasted, but the two of us were startled out of our moment by a rapping on the clinic door.

We glanced over to the clinic and the glass windows nearby, where more than a dozen faces were staring at the two of us. They must have heard us fighting and decided to watch. And then kept watching when we started kissing.

The rapping on the glass was followed by a man's voice. "Hey! Hey lovebirds! Are you zombies? No? Then get in here!"

I recovered quicker than Sakura did, and the people in the clinic were kind enough to let us use their decontamination shower. It wasn't a request either, since the folks here were paranoid about all the zombie goo on the two of us. Their reasoning became apparent when we started talking to them.

“Are you infected?” The man who’d shouted at us before asked.

Before we could respond, he shined a flashlight in our eyes. “Hmm... unusually responsive pupil dilation.” He pressed his hand to my chest. “Normal heart rate. No signs of bite wounds. Impressive muscle tone, too. Must be an athlete.”

I chuckled. I was no athlete, but I could see how the man—presumably the clinic’s doctor—might come to that conclusion. The extra stat points had made a lot of changes to my body.

“And you, miss,” the man felt for Sakura’s heartbeat on the side of her neck. “Hmm, alive as well. Good. I would have been extremely concerned to find zombies participating in reproductive behavior.” He shuddered. “I never liked necrophiliacs. Everyone has strange urges, but professionals can resist them. Assistant! Cross out that last line of notes.”

“Yes sir,” a harried-looking young man said as he scribbled on a notebook at high speed. His pencil had been worn down to a tiny nub, and the thick stack of used sheets and lead-stained hands meant he’d probably filled most of the pages up.

“I suppose having two human specimens as capable as you will be useful,” the doctor said.

“Come! We need help restraining a few soon-to-be-undead. I want to observe the process, but we haven’t had the confidence to hold anyone that long. But with you two here, we’ll finally be able to tell if this is a virus, fungus, bacteria, or some other malady!” The doctor cackled and rubbed his hands together.

“Uh, what?” Sakura asked.

“The zombies, girl! We are in the midst of a zombie apocalypse, and only science can save us!”

“Come again?”

Eventually, the doctor explained from the beginning. He was Doctor Roswell, and this was his clinic. He’d been hard at work when the apocalypse began. That had been an odd experience, and he still wasn’t sure what to make of it. But one thing was certain. Upon his return, many of his patients had turned into undead.

But as an avid part-time zombie apocalypse movie critic, Doctor Roswell had been prepared for just such a scenario. His office had a collection of weapons, ranging from a modern shotgun to a medieval longbow with silver tipped arrows. So when the gun failed, he just pulled out some of his other weapons—starting with his battery powered repeating crossbow.

“And look, these leather restraints and ballgags are perfect for restraining a zombie patient! I bought them online, hardly believing so many people were also preparing to restrain zombies for dissection like I was. The ballgags are especially important.”

He tapped his chin. “I’m still not entirely sure these spread their disease by bite, but you can never be too careful. I need the two of you to outfit the poor infected woman in the other room with these restraints so I can go in and examine her properly.”

Doctor Roswell held up what was clearly a set of leather bedroom restraints and a ballgag. He had... uhh... quite the collection. His assistants shared sheepish expressions with Sakura and me. They were likely aware that most people who used

those cuffs and gags didn't buy them to use on zombies.

Still, it was an easy enough task, and I was curious about how the undead worked, so the two of us helped Doctor Roswell with his experiment. Also, I wanted to test my new Examine skill.

First, I looked at Doctor Roswell's assistant.

Human - Level 1

That was all the information the skill provided at first, but even that would be enough to distinguish who I could beat and who I couldn't at a glance. I noted that when I Examined someone I'd been introduced to, I got a name instead of their race.

Doctor Roswell (Human) - Level 1

One by one, the information for everyone else changed as they introduced themselves. If nothing else, I'd never forget people's names ever again.

To make sure it worked on enemies, I tested the zombie they had in containment. Apparently, she'd been a nurse but had been unfortunate enough to get bitten by her patient during the early stages of the integration, before they understood what they were dealing with.

Doctor Roswell had been doing his best to keep her alive, hoping that she wouldn't turn into a zombie if she survived. But, unfortunately, with the power outages, a lot of his most advanced equipment was offline, so he'd had to make do with cruder methods. In

the end, it just wasn't enough, and the nurse had died on his operating table.

"Also, we don't normally do surgery here. I haven't actually seen a scalpel since medical school," Doctor Roswell explained. He winced. "That may have been part of the issue."

Zombie - Level 1

The information my Examine skill provided for enemies was identical to what it provided for my fellow humans. Not much, but enough to save my life or ease my worries when I encountered something unknown—enough to tell me what was and was not all that powerful.

Sakura sat on the zombie's chest while I put the gag in her mouth and then locked her arms and legs to the examination table as quickly as I could. The zombie was thrashing a lot, and despite all her strength, Sakura only weighed so much.

"You're very good at that," Sakura commented as I swiftly gagged the zombie and finished binding her wrists. "Have you done it before?"

I chuckled. "No, I've never tied up a zombie before."

"I didn't mean a zombie," she quipped.

I turned back to the glass windows just outside of the operating room.

Doctor Roswell had his forehead pressed to the glass as he watched us work, and

behind him, his assistant was scribbling notes.

“You sure you really want that answer... right here and now?”

Sakura blushed. “I swear, I have the worst luck.”

When we were finished, the doctor burst into the room, and we cleared out to talk with his assistants and the surviving patients. It was difficult convincing them this wasn't a zombie apocalypse, but rather more of an RPG apocalypse. We figured it would be much harder to convince Doctor Roswell of this, so getting everyone else up to speed on their own was better.

“So, you're saying, that if I kill some of those zombies, I'll get levels, and then it'll be easier to kill zombies?” Doctor Roswell's assistant asked, massaging his cramped hand.

“Yeah, that's it exactly.” I nodded. “Sakura and I were just regular office workers. The only reason we could take down all those zombies outside was because of our stats. You guys should have gotten some for free, thanks to Blessing of the System.”

“This alien System thing is granting people special powers?” A woman crossed her arms, looking at me skeptically.

I frowned. Perhaps a demonstration was in order. “Grab that beaker there and set it on the table.”

They did as I asked, and when they were all watching, I pointed my finger at the beaker and shattered it with a Mana Bolt.

"What... How?! Are you a psychic?" Doctor Roswell's assistant asked. "If you are, please don't tell the doctor. He'll want to experiment on you as much as that zombie."

"I'm not psychic. I'm magical. It's a spell called Mana Bolt. You might pick it up yourself after you hit ten intelligence."

They had many more questions, but that was only to be expected after showing people real magic. And even more so, when I told them they could use magic, too. Being able to shatter glass just by pointing at it had everyone's hearts racing. Far more so than Sakura's ability to smash a dozen zombies to pieces with a baseball bat—even if her powers were arguably more useful for your average survivor.

The reason I picked up Mana Bolt and started focusing on Intelligence was because I would have died to the Rat Matriarch's Toxic Bite without having an ability to kill things at range and level up. But I supposed firing off a Mana Bolt was much cleaner and cooler than bashing a monster's brains in, and I happily shared the secret.

I tried talking a few of the people from the clinic into making their way over to the office. We could certainly use a few people with medical knowledge over there, especially if they brought some medical kits with them. The only one to take me up on the offer was the doctor's note taker. In his case, I'm pretty sure he volunteered because his hand was cramping up too much to continue taking notes for the doctor anymore.

We headed back, but he was slow for our tastes since he was just level one. Sakura and I traveled fast, thanks to all our other stats—though I'm pretty sure Sakura could go a lot faster than I could. In the end, Sakura slung the assistant over her shoulder and carried him back at a steady jog while I kept pace behind her. We returned to the shelter to find Bridget waiting for us with a rifle in hand and a big smile on her face.

“Did it work?” I asked.

She nodded. “Already tested. Got a special title for it too. Turns out the guns don’t work unless you disassemble every part and put them back together again—something about the System requiring the intent of a craftsman to make an item that it recognizes.”

“Interesting.”

Craig must have lucked into the solution. He was putting his own gun back together when the apocalypse began. He was probably hiding in his office until he finished, which is why we hadn’t seen him until we’d cleared out the cockroaches in our office and were fighting the rats in the law office.

“What was the title?” Sakura asked.

“Mechanical Master. Apparently, the System considers a common rifle quite complex.” She tilted her head to the side. “I wonder what titles it would give to someone reassembling a combat drone.”

Bridget ran her fingers through her hair. Curly blond locks slipped through her fingers, falling perfectly along her shoulders. After all the fighting we did earlier, her hair should have been a tangled mess. Perhaps her stats just wouldn't let that happen. In fact, now that I was thinking about it, every time Sakura got dirty, the grime simply fell off of her when I looked the other way.

Bridget blushed when she saw me looking at her.

"I'm impressed," I admitted.

"Now that we know the trick, I could get you the title really quick." Bridget smiled.

I gave Bridget a warm half-embrace around the shoulder. "Bridget, you're a lifesaver. Lead the way."

Mechanical Master (Common) - You have displayed mastery over manipulating the physical world in complex patterns incomprehensible to most sapients of your rank.

+3 Intelligence and a permanent bonus to solving complex puzzles.

As soon as Bridget told me about the reward for getting the Mechanical Master title, I knew I had to have it. Three more Intelligence points was nearly an entire level's worth, and that was especially amazing for someone focused on getting more mana, like I was. By now, I could use my Mana Bolt ability with impunity, though I was worrying that I wasn't getting offers for any new skills.

More mana wouldn't help me much, since I had more than I could expect to exhaust in your average fight. Even a series of fights would be hard pressed to drain my prodigious reserves. If I didn't get a new mana ability soon, I would have to switch to putting stats into physical attributes again, which would have me using my vitality ability to turn my mana into a secondary health bar.

The odd thing was the fact that the System treated just putting together a bunch of gun parts according to instructions as something so remarkable. It wasn't really all that special. Craig had managed it, after all.

I imagined any human who put a bit of effort into the task could figure it out, even without instructions. But apparently, the System saw it as special. Maybe it was used to working with creatures closer to apes than humans. Still, I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

After getting the title, I headed out again with Sakura and Bridget, with Frank staying behind. Ben needed someone of a fairly high level to help the others get the confidence to head out of the office in search of easy fights to level up. As promised, Ben took one rifle, and I took the other.

We called the police department up and shared the trick with them, and they promised to try it. They also said they wouldn't be enforcing any restrictions on firearms for the foreseeable future, which was nice. Not that anyone was going to take the threat of being arrested seriously when the streets were full of giant monsters.

I spotted a giant squirrel scampering through the rubbish scattered around the area. It would have been about hip-high if I was standing next to it, and would have looked like a normal gray squirrel, if not for its freakish size and the red streaks running down its side.

Just like the other fuzzy creature I'd fought, this one spat fireballs in our direction. I used my Examine skill on it.

Fire Squirrel - Level 5

“This one is stronger than the last squirrel,” I told the others. “Looks like the critters in the city are getting stronger.”

“Should we chase it down?” Sakura asked.

I shook my head. “No. This is a perfect chance for me to try this baby out.” I patted the rifle.

Dropping to one knee, I leveled the rifle. The giant squirrel didn’t know what I was doing, but must have it thought it could take the lot of us, because it charged toward us, spitting fire the entire time.

I dodged the first two fireballs, but the third should have hit me. Just as it was about to wash over my unprotected face, the fireball abruptly swerved to the left and slammed into the ground. It was like someone with an invisible fly swatter had slapped it aside. That must be the effect of my Deflect spell.

I could feel a slight drain on my mana as the spell expended mana to exert energy on the fireball. It wasn't too expensive, all things considered. I imagined deflecting a handgun bullet would probably cost a little more to push aside, since it would have less mass but would be moving much faster.

The squirrel just stood there with its jaw open. I liked to think it was shocked, but it was probably just generating another fireball. But before it could, I pulled the trigger on my rifle.

You have gained the rifle proficiency!

The squirrel squeaked in pain and leaped backward. It was angry, now, but it wasn't dead. Blood leaked down its side, but whatever its vitality was, it had enough to shrug off a single bullet. That just meant I had to shoot it again.

The System had acknowledged my first attack with the rifle, and I was curious about how fast that proficiency would level. The squirrel shrugged off the first bullet, ignoring the attack, and continued its charge.

I realized then that this kind of situation was probably what had given Craig problems on his trip to the convenience store. Bullets were fast and packed a punch, but creatures with higher vitality stats would be hard to put down with bullets alone. More than that, my rifle rounds were big enough to topple an ordinary deer in one shot—and whatever Craig was firing from his pistol was considerably smaller. If this giant squirrel was shrugging off my rifle rounds, Craig would have needed to empty an entire magazine into it to put this thing down.

Maybe things would have been different if I had a semi-automatic weapon, but this was an older bolt-action rifle, so it took me half a second more to fire a second shot.

The squirrel squealed in a combination of fury and panic as it was wounded once more, but before it could decide to keep charging or flee for its life, I shot it a third time.

This last bullet went right through the creature's eye, putting it down for good.

You have slain [Fire Squirrel - Level 5!]

“Not bad,” I said as I stood and propped the rifle up on my shoulder, recasting Deflect.

Weapons like this would be a complete game changer at lower levels and would let ordinary humans fend off the local wildlife. Just having these would let humanity retake Crownhill. That way, we'd only have to worry about what was outside the city, instead of huddling in our buildings. With some luck and perseverance, we could rebuild some semblance of civilization.

But there were problems with it as well. It already took multiple shots to take down a monster at level six. What would happen at level sixteen? Or level sixty? Would it take a hundred bullets? Ten thousand bullets?

Crownhill didn't have an ammunition factory. We might make gunpowder, but what about the primers? And worse, when the day came that we started running out of bullets, we'd be in for a reckoning.

All our strongest warriors would only have gun-related proficiencies. Everyone would have to retrain themselves from scratch with whatever weapons we could make. And I had a hunch that whatever threat made us run out of bullets, wouldn't be one that'd let us take some time off from the fight to retrain ourselves.

But I knew how much hope these weapons would bring the other survivors. Of course, no human wanted to face down a snarling feral creature with nothing but sticks and stones. Still, there was something about having a gun that renewed your confidence. I'd seen the way so many flocked to Craig's side when he flashed his pistol. A gun represented undeniable physical power to those who knew what it was.

Faced with this apocalypse, it was that symbol we needed more than anything. All this served as justification for robbing the gun store, which is exactly what we did. We stripped every pistol, shotgun, and rifle out of storage, along with every bit of ammunition we could find.

"As soon as the secret for how to make guns work spreads, this place and every single one like it is going to be looted bare," I announced as we arrived. "And I think these weapons are of better use in our hands, than in the hands of some strangers. Strip the shelves bare."

And so, we went on our third shopping run of the day, this one for weapons. Thankfully, we'd thought to bring some of the shopping carts from the grocery store over with us. That made bringing our haul home a hell-of-a-lot easier. I killed several more squirrels, raccoons, and other creatures with the rifle, though all of them were on the weaker side and didn't give me a level-up. Sakura even tried the rifle, shooting a few monsters that looked like they would attack us, though she still claimed to prefer bashing things with her baseball bat.

I had trouble picking up another proficiency level with the rifle, though. I had a hunch that getting more proficiency levels required increasingly greater levels of danger and strife. Simply leveling a gun at something and pulling a trigger didn't satisfy the System like bashing things up close and personal with a baseball bat.

No one gained any levels, so I had a hunch that it might even affect gaining levels negatively. Perhaps the fact that so much power came from the weapon reduced the System's rewards to the user. But, despite the reduction in experience, the sheer stopping power of a gun meant that those with them could just kill more enemies to compensate for the reduced experience and still come out ahead.

Craig had proven that much.

With these doubts in my mind, I made one other addition to our looting trip. The gun store didn't just sell guns, they had a whole shelf full of hunting knives. I picked two for myself. One of a smaller utility size, and another as long as my forearm. It was painted jet black and made of good rust resistant steel. I bet it would probably have made many

warriors of the distant past extremely jealous.

While it was technically labeled a knife, I slotted it in my head as a short sword. I picked it up, felt its heft, and then belted it on. Its sheath was quite comfortable, which reinforced my decision to add it to my survival kit. Mana Bolt was great and all, but I wanted a weapon in case people got up close and personal with me.

When we returned to the office, Ben was ecstatic. He'd been practicing with his rifle by shooting cockroaches in the basement, and had added several levels quickly.

Benjamin Fisher (Human) - Level 5

Now that I had Examine, I could look around the shelter and spot who was actually doing the fighting. The spread was fairly wide, with most people still at level one. Only a few were at levels two and three, but there were two others at level five like Ben, including his wife Margaret.

"Now, this is how you survive an apocalypse!" Ben gave his rifle a kiss.

Margaret stepped up behind him, putting on a sad face and shaking her head. "Now, if only you still kissed me like that."

The couple shared a laugh. They'd clearly been together for a long time. After the shared laugh, Ben's expression turned grim.

"Honey, I want to talk to Carter about that thing I was telling you about earlier," Ben said.

Margaret's eyes darted to meet mine, and her smile turned somber. "I'll grab Sakura. We'll use the rear conference room."

"What's this about?" I asked as Margaret found Sakura and started leading her toward one of the conference rooms at the rear of the office.

Ben put an arm around my shoulders and started leading me in the same direction.

Sakura and Margaret entered first, and Ben shut the door behind us after we followed them. Margaret passed around a few cups of office tea in paper cups. It wasn't particularly good, but this little meeting suddenly felt almost formal.

We weren't the only people in the room. Ben and Margaret had also gathered three other men and one woman, who were already seated and waiting for us. The only one I recognized was Frank. As far as the survivors we'd met went, all of them were a decently high level. Ben introduced them one by one.

"Carter, Sakura, these three are our strongest according to the Examine ability. This is Stacy Williams from Human Resources, Brett Winchester from the Auto store on fifth street, and Michael Thompson from the Exterminator office across the street. And, of course, there is Frank, who's been a tremendous help to us already. Everyone, this is Sakura and Carter, the two Margaret was telling you about earlier."

Stacy Williams (Human) - Level 6

Stacy Williams was a woman in her late thirties. She wore horn-rimmed glasses but had taken the lenses out recently. A few points in perception would have fixed any problems

she used to have with her vision. She had on a long dress that looked like it would be equally at home at the office or church, but little else.

Brett Winchester (Human) - Level 5

Brett was a heavyset man in his fifties. He had oil stains on his hands and tightly drawn brows with lines crossing his entire face. He looked like he'd worn a perpetual scowl for years, but today had found a reason to smile. There was a bit of blood staining his sleeves, but he didn't seem bothered by it.

Michael Thomson (Human) - Level 5

Michael was somewhere between Stacy and Brett in age. He was tall and lean, giving his lanky form an almost skeletal appearance. He wore a white vest splashed with green insect guts, and sitting by his ankle was a bottle of pesticide. His method of getting to his current level was immediately obvious. He'd waged a one-man war against giant bugs, and the System had rewarded him for it.

They were sizing Sakura and me up the same way I was looking at them. Stacy, in particular, must have had the Examine skill because I felt a tingle run up my spine as she looked at me. When she saw my level, she straightened in her chair, and her expression changed to a reserved smile.

"So, this is about the settlement quest, then?" I asked, coming to the obvious realization.

"Partly, yes," Ben replied. "We need to get those details worked out. But first, we have another important matter to discuss."

"Oh?" I set my tea down and pushed it aside. I could tell from Ben's tone that this was going to be a serious discussion.

Ben took one last sip of his tea before doing the same with his cup. Then he looked me dead in the eyes and spoke. "We're going to murder Craig."

"Murder?" I asked.

It hadn't even been a full day, and we'd gone from a society of law and order to plotting the death of a fellow human. I would've liked to say it was wrong, but I'd killed those escaped prisoners a few hours ago in full view of the survivors we were rescuing. I didn't have room to talk.

"That's right. Cold, premeditated murder," Ben said. "It's best to put it out there here and now—that's what we're going to do. Craig's a problem, but now that we have guns of our own, we've finally taken his advantage and matched it. Before he was able to push us around and pluck people from our ranks as he pleased. What if he starts demanding our supplies? Are we just going to let him and his gang leech off of us?"

Sakura frowned. "You said it yourself. We have guns now. Why would he even think he can push us around still? Yes, Craig's a pushy, arrogant asshole. But he isn't suicidal."

"He used to hold the advantage, and he pushed it as hard as he could," Ben replied. "Now we hold the advantage, but who's to say that will hold? What if Craig and his gang get lucky and stumble across an army supply depot? If he's driving down the street in a tank, we'll be right back to square one. No, we need to nip this problem, now, when we have the chance to do so."

"Hold on," Michael Thompson the exterminator said. "I said I was prepared to kill whatever ugly monster reared its head at humanity. I didn't sign up to plot murder. I don't know who this Craig guy is, but I want no part in killing him." His cheeks flushed red and he scowled at the rest of the group, as though unable to believe he was sitting before a bunch of his fellow humans. He put his hands on the table and pushed himself to his feet. Reaching down, he picked up his bottle of pesticide and looked like he was about to storm off in a huff.

Ben's lips drew thin, and he glanced at Margaret with a look that probably meant '*I told you so*' or something along those lines.

"We're going to do that too, trust me," Margaret held her hands up. "Just wait awhile, please. If you don't want to talk about Craig, then don't forget we'll be doing the settlement quest as well."

Michael grumbled something under his breath. "I'll be here for that. But for now, I'd rather wait outside. Come and get me when you're done with this little conspiracy of yours. I don't want to hear it."

He left the conference room, and Ben closed the door behind him.

"Sorry, hun," Margaret said as she gave Ben a hug. "I really thought he'd see reason."

"It's alright, dear. Michael there hasn't met Craig in person. Once he talks to the man, he might change his opinion on murder."

I chuckled. "Craig has that effect on people."

Ben stared at everyone left in the room. "I take it that by remaining, the rest of you are open to the idea of eliminating Craig before he becomes a threat we can't handle?"

Stacy nodded. "Of course."

Brett tapped his fingers against the table for a moment before nodding as well. "I've asked around. Like Michael, I didn't work here and don't know this Craig from a horse's ass. But if this many people hate his guts bad enough to want him dead, I doubt he's the kind of guy I'd want to make friends with. I'm in."

Frank nodded immediately. "One time, about a year ago, when I was getting a drink he thought I was Bridget and slapped my ass by mistake. I told him I'd kill him for that one day." Frank drained his cup of steaming hot tea in one gulp. "I'm no liar."

Sakura sighed. "He is a danger to the rest of the office. And if he was out of the picture, my old employees would be free to seek safety with you guys. I imagine they're starting to realize the error they made in their choice of leadership."

All eyes turned to me.

Ben spoke with a grim face. "Carter, you're probably the key to all of this. Nobody is closer to him in level than you, and you understand best if it's even possible to take him down. As people gain levels, we've seen them do some pretty inexplicable stuff, like that finger attack of yours."

I drummed my fingers against the table. I couldn't help but feel that we'd be crossing a line if we did this. If we killed Craig, we'd be setting a precedent that we might kill anyone who was inconvenient.

Was this the end of Ben's promised democracy before it even began? But Craig was a threat to us all, that was undeniable. The only question was if it really had to come to this.

I saw the look in everyone's eyes. They were doing this, one way or another. I didn't like it, but I could see why they thought it had to be done. And if I wanted to make sure it was done right, I'd have to get my hands dirty, as well.

I nodded slowly. "It is possible to kill someone at a high level. He might have a way to deflect a shot or even two, but if you use enough bullets, you should still be able to overwhelm his defenses."

I was talking mostly about my own Deflect ability, though I didn't plan on divulging the details of that spell. The main value it had, was in stopping surprise attacks—and it couldn't do that if people knew how it worked. If folks knew its limitations, they'd just have two people shoot me at the same time.

No. I trusted Ben, but it seemed to me that special lifesaving spells like Deflect should be kept as secret as possible. And I was willing to bet that Craig had come to the same conclusion. If he had a secret ability that would save him from a surprise attack, he wouldn't have told anyone about it.

Ben sighed in relief. "Good. It'll be a big help to all of us if you would join our little conspiracy. If he's got unknown unique abilities, we'd like someone with unique unknown abilities of their own on our side."

I met each of their gazes. "Alright, I'm in. But I want it done cleanly and quietly. I don't want anyone outside this room to know what we plotted here today. Let them think

Craig died to monsters or something."

Ben nodded. "Then we're of one mind. We need plausible deniability, otherwise we won't be able to build a society based on the rule and law."

When Margaret and Ben explained their plan, I had to thank myself that they were on my side. I knew the couple hadn't built a law office as successful as the one they had from nothing by being pushovers, but to hear their plot firsthand was something else. They weren't taking any chances with Craig.

He probably had multiple ten stat point skills and maybe one twenty-point skill, since he was the highest level of anyone. When we made our move, we had to be certain to take him down, since there was no telling if one of those abilities would let him slip away. I'd never shared the details of my vitality ability, but if Craig had something like my power to convert mana into health points, he'd be tough to kill.

"Rumors is he's close to reaching level ten," Ben said. "We need to take him out before then. Just like with skills, level ten is supposed to be a threshold."

"That's when you can get a class," I said. "We don't know what kind of bonuses that'll give him."

"Exactly," Ben nodded. "But we also can't just gun him down in the street. There are a lot of people who think like Michael, and the story will hurt us when we try to absorb Craig's splinter group."

Margaret pursed her lips. "If that were to happen, there would probably still be rumors going around when we start meeting other survivor groups. No, we need to make this look like an accident. Maybe we can even give Craig a glorious death and claim he sacrificed himself to complete the settlement quest. He'll certainly be more helpful to our cause that way than if we leave him alive to stir up trouble."

"You want to exhaust him in the fighting," I realized. "You'll invite him to join in on the quest, then when he's out of bullets and low on health points, we attack."

"He'll soften up the monster waves we'll have to deal with for the quest, too. And forcing his men to fight alongside ours will go a long way to quickly reintegrating his group. I heard he picked up more survivors on his last food run, and some of those guys look tough. A couple of them are even escapees from the local prison," Margaret explained.

I drummed my fingers against the table. "I still think it's a bit risky. You said he was close to level ten? What happens if he levels up during the quest?"

Ben frowned. "We'll just have to keep someone with the Examine skill close to him. If he levels up, we'll spring our plan early. Besides, it takes time to allocate stat points and make System screen selections. It isn't like he'll stand there fiddling with his menu in the middle of a battle."

I wasn't entirely convinced, as I'd allocated stat points in a hurry before. But most of the others nodded along, and presumably the class selection screen would be even more complex. What were the chances Craig would know he had to make his choices in a hurry?

With the plan in place, we invited Michael back in and talked about the quest we were about to complete to establish a settlement.

"Shouldn't we wait the full three days?" Michael argued. "We don't think the monsters have the Blessed of the System title, which means they aren't getting the free bonus stat points. That means we humans will be a lot stronger even if we don't level up in that time."

Everyone looked at one another. The real reason we were in such a hurry to complete the quest was because it was part of our plan to deal with Craig. But given Michael's earlier reaction, we couldn't exactly say that out loud.

Ben came up with an explanation that didn't mention Craig at all. "According to the quest description, the monsters we'll be facing will probably be the same creatures we've been fighting on the streets, just more of them. They probably have their own bonuses that we're unaware of. I don't know how, but they're definitely getting stronger with every passing hour. We might be stronger in three days, but the monsters probably will be as well."

I nodded. "And we want to leverage the power of those firearms. Some of those monsters at levels five and up took three or more shots to kill. I imagine that is only going to increase as the monsters' average level goes up. We want to take full advantage of the power boost the guns give us, and we want to exploit them to their fullest as quickly as possible—before it's too late to level with them."

Between the arguments the two of us made against waiting, Michael yielded. He wasn't completely satisfied, but since everyone else was convinced, he opted not to fight against the tide.

After that, we went into preparing the specifics. Mostly, that meant assigning roles and combat leaders. It turned out that Ben, Brett, and Michael were all military veterans, so they would take the lead in drilling our motley band of civilians into a group that could hold a line with guns and defensive positions.

"Carter, I'm afraid you're on your own. Officer training didn't cover how to use men who can shoot bolts of magic or women who are frighteningly dangerous with a baseball bat. If you don't mind, we'll give you and your team the rear wall to guard. It's the only part of the office we couldn't convert into a star fort," Ben said.

The strange layout of the office was starting to make more sense. Ben had been preparing for this all morning, and most of the furniture and debris laid out was all meant to create kill corridors and cover for people with guns.

"We'll hold," I promised. "And we'll help out those to either side of us if they're getting overwhelmed."

We went through a lot of stuff about logistics and tactics. Ben was pretty certain the quest would last between six and eight hours, which would probably take us just past sunset. That wasn't ideal, since we still didn't know by how much high perception improved night vision. Fortunately, Margaret had a solution for that.

"The construction guys have an electric generator and a bunch of floodlights for night work. The only problem is that the generator doesn't work," Margaret said. "It's just like with the guns."

My eyes lit up. "You think taking them apart and putting them back together will fix whatever's wrong with them?"

Margaret shrugged. "It's worth a try. Otherwise we're going to have to fashion torches and lamps."

We went through an itinerary one by one. Ben and Margaret had clearly put just as much thought into completing this quest as they had into killing Craig. I had a bit of advice to add in here and there, especially with regards to system-related topics.

"No, you want people to be able to step back at any time and have their position covered by an ally," I said when we were talking about combat shifts. "That way, they can allocate stat points before jumping back into the fight."

"Hmm... that makes sense. We'll do it your way, Carter," Ben declared. "This means everyone needs to be in battle-buddy pairs. Two-person teams, more likely three if we want to be safe." He grimaced. "I'm not sure we have that many guns."

"The people on the front can share. If they're stepping away, they can hand off what they're wielding to someone else while they work on their stats."

The meeting lasted nearly an hour, and after it came more meetings with the rest of the military veterans Ben would be relying on them to command the various walls. We were losing daylight with every moment wasted, though, so Ben expedited things.

I was impressed by just how quickly he'd set up a chain of command in the shelter. One by one, Ben took his most trusted people and had them wrap a strip of orange cloth around their arms to signify that they were someone others should listen to. Sakura and Frank both got one. Ben gave me a white one—which was the same color he and his wife wore.

"It doesn't mean anything right now," Ben said. "But maybe it will be once the shelter truly gets going."

"There's one last thing we have to do," I reminded him. "Craig."

Ben sighed. "Want to draw lots on who has to get him?"

In the end, the two of us sent Margaret to find Craig, though I heard her recruiting someone else to actually make the trip across the hall and get him. For a while, I was worried Craig would ignore our invitation. Ben and I looked at one another ominously, since him simply ignoring us was something we hadn't prepared for.

But our fears proved unneeded a few minutes later when he appeared. Not just him either. He had two dozen rough-looking men at his back, all tough and strong. A pair of them were even wearing the same prison uniforms as the two we'd had to kill in the street, earlier.

I was usually against judging people based on cursory examinations of their appearance. Not everyone in the local prison was a murderer. In fact, the local newspaper said that most of them were in there for minor non-violent drug related offenses. Sakura had hired some staff from the local prison once—and besides one troublemaker, they made fine employees.

But if I were a director looking to cast a pair of street thugs for a movie, these two would have been perfect for the job. From the scars on their cheeks to the missing teeth and the ruthless gleams in their eyes, these guys were tough cookies. I knew those two were the sort of people you wanted to stay away from.

And yet Craig kept the both of them right behind him and in front of his other recruits, as though the two of them held virtues he wanted the others to aspire to. The rest of Craig's people seemed to have done their best to imitate them. The sleeves had been

ripped off their shirts, they'd discarded their work clothes in favor of jeans or camouflage pants, and they walked with a wide-legged aggressive swagger.

Craig wanted his people domineering, assertive, aggressive, and one wrong word from turning to violence. I didn't agree with his methods, but I couldn't argue with his results.

Human - Level 7

Human - Level 8

The two wearing prison uniforms were the strongest of the bunch, with the rest being somewhere between levels four and six. That was as strong as Sakura, Frank, and Bridget. Except, instead of just three higher level fighters, Craig had a dozen people at that level—well, eleven men and one who might have been a particularly masculine-looking woman, but that was up for debate.

I was suspicious. There weren't that many high-level monsters in the city. How had those two prisoners reached such a high level? I was pretty sure I knew the answer, though.

The other prisoners Sakura and I took out had leveled by killing other humans. These two had probably gotten their levels the same way. After all, I doubted the warden and guards let the prisoners escape freely. Nor did I think the prisoners all liked each other and had joined hands to sing kum-ba-yah in a peaceful plea for freedom. There had probably been quite a blood bath at the prison that had resulted in a number of high-leveled individuals.

But the followers paled before their leader, the man himself.

Craig (Human) - Level 9

"Hello, Craig," Ben held out his hand for a shake.

Craig accepted the gesture and gripped Ben's hand tight with a cocksure grin. I saw Ben wince, though he hid the look quickly and broke the handshake off as quickly as he could.

"Come over to our meeting room," Ben gestured to the very room where we'd been plotting Craig's murder less than an hour before. "Your men can wait outside."

"Nah. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of my boys here," Craig gestured behind him. His followers chuckled, though the laughter had a dark undertone.

Ben straightened his jacket. He'd tossed his tie and undone the top two buttons on his shirt, but he kept the coat.

"Alright then. I have a unique quest I want to share with you," Ben began.

A moment later he shared his System screen, and it became visible to all onlookers. Craig studied the screen, reading it over carefully. The description for the settlement establishment quest wasn't long, but he must have been reading it awfully carefully to take three whole minutes to go through it.

"So, you want me to be part of this quest. What's in it for me?" Craig asked.

"Use of the Obelisk if we win. The same as everyone else," Ben offered.

Craig snorted. "Do I look like everyone else?" He looked to his companions behind us. "Are any of us the same as everyone else?"

They responded with hoots, hollers, and heckling.

"Hell no!"

"Fuck that!"

"Old man, you better offer us more than that or we'll just take it!"

"You heard the boys." Craig turned back to Ben with a smug look on his face. "Ya' know, I'm thinking this office isn't big enough for two survival groups. You seem half-decent at managing the bullshit, so how about I put you in charge of the campsite while I take care of the fighting. To be honest, I was hoping Bridget would take the job, but since she's being a bitch, I'll offer it to you."

Ben scowled. "I'll pass, thank you very much."

Craig snorted, looking Ben up and down. He was probably examining him, and from the expression on his face he was unimpressed with Ben's current level, which was just five. It was impressive for most people, but it put him a clear step behind Craig and his elites.

Craig turned to his companions. "Well boys, which of you lads wants to be the camp housewife in his place. Hands up!"

None of Craig's followers raised their hands.

"Well that sucks. Guess we're going to--"

Ben raised his hand and interrupted Craig in the middle of his next sentence. "I wouldn't if I were you."

A dozen men and women armed with the firearms Sakura and I had just acquired popped out of hiding and leveled their guns at Craig.

"Shit." One of Craig's followers took a step away from his boss.

"Guns?" Craig rolled his eyes. "Don't try to bluff me. I know they don't work."

"A demonstration, then. Honey, my rifle." Ben held out his hand, and Margaret placed his rifle in it. He pointed the rifle at the ceiling and fired off a single round, loud and clear for all to see.

Craig chewed on his lip as he examined the hole in the ceiling. Dust wafted out of it and drifted to the floor below. He turned his gaze back to Ben and the rifle in his hands. I could see the combination of hunger and anger in his eyes. I watched his fingers twitch, and knew that Craig was on the verge of making a very poor decision.

Sensing the direction talks were going, I realized it was time to make my presence known. The moment I stepped out of the crowd, Craig's eyes turned and snapped to me. I stepped up to Ben's side, and his tense shoulders relaxed when I was standing there with him against Craig.

I felt the familiar tingle up my spine as Craig examined me, and I knew he was looking at my level.

"You've leveled up." The smile fell from Craig's face and was replaced by a scowl. He was still higher level than me, but he probably didn't have as big a lead as he expected.

"I did."

Craig's hand stopped drifting towards his belt, and his gun stayed where it was. My presence had changed his mental calculations. If he thought he could take us before, he'd changed his mind once he realized I was here and that I was only one level below him.

For all Craig's faults, he had been quick to adapt to the arrival of the system, and he knew power when he saw it. He backed down, and the crisis was averted.

"Now, about Ben's offer," I began, gesturing to Benjamin's screen on display.

Craig ran his hand along his chin, nodding. "I see it. But my complaint from before still stands. I want more than access to this obelisk thing. I'm not getting a damn job when I can just kill things."

"See something else of interest, then?"

"Yeah. This government thing. It says the Settlement Owner gets to be in charge and gets free shit. Sounds badass. I want that position. Make me Settlement Owner and me and my people will help you."

"I can't." Ben shook his head. "I promised that to Carter."

Craig's eyes darted to meet mine. "I see. Well, shouldn't the position go to whichever of us is the strongest."

I shook my head. "A position like this one should go to whoever is the most competent at the job."

Craig grinned. "Yeah. And it sounds like the job is about kicking ass. What do you say you and I take this outside? Just you and me. My boys will hang back, and you can't hide behind Sakura's skirt."

I grimaced. I was a lot more powerful than I was before, but Craig was still a level ahead of me. I knew how much every level was worth. Could I beat Craig? It wasn't impossible. I could sacrifice mana to heal myself every time I was shot, then hit him back with mana bolts. Assuming Craig didn't have any special abilities to save him in that scenario, it just might work.

But there were decent odds that he did have some kind of an ability like that, and I wasn't about to roll those dice.

"How about an alternative to a fight that will only weaken the overall strength of the settlement? The two of us complete this quest and we'll compare kills at the end of it. Whoever took out the most enemies for the quest wins the position," I suggested.

Craig scratched his chin and rolled his shoulders. "Sounds interesting. But--"

A message flashed before our eyes.

Settlement Contribution Points unlocked!

Earn early Settlement Contribution Points by killing enemies in the Settlement Establishment Quest!

Points will be awarded according to the number and levels of enemies slain during the completion of the quest.

A bonus round will be held at the end of the quest to determine the Settlement Owner and settle any disputes.

"Huh. Looks like the System thinks my idea has merit."

One of the prisoners behind Craig whirled around, looking left and right. "Shit, man, is the damn thing spying on us?"

A few others were having a similar reaction.

I played it cool, as though I'd known this was exactly what would happen.

"Fine. Deal. We'll hold our side of the office building," Craig huffed. Though I could see a hint of fear in the corner of his eyes. That System message suddenly appearing had frightened him, and he was starting to think I might know something he didn't.

In truth, I was just as surprised as he was—not that I was going to admit it.

Craig held out his hand for a handshake, but I sealed the deal with a fist bump instead. I'd seen what he tried to do to Ben's hand, and I knew Craig was petty enough to try to break a few bones just to prove he had put more points into strength than I had.

With a glare, he turned and his goons parted for him as he marched back the way he'd come.

The moment he was out of sight, Ben clapped me on the back. "Beautifully done. I wish I'd had you at the negotiating table for some of our more difficult clients."

I turned, and to Ben, I gave a real handshake. "Let's get this quest started before we run out of daylight. Good luck."

The office itself would be our rear line, and that's where the noncombatants would hide. The actual battlefield would be around the office, where we'd hopefully hold the barricades Ben's survivors had constructed without needing to fall back into the office building itself.

The rear of the building, where I would command and be defending was the most difficult to defend of the four sides. There were brick and mortar buildings on all sides before the integration, and after the System copied and pasted new buildings everywhere, there were blind corridors left and right. That meant people with guns would have far less time to spot any enemies that were approaching and open fire on them.

For any other group that would be a problem, but I had Sakura, Frank, and Bridget. The three of them had all been putting points into physical stats, which meant unlike everyone else they weren't afraid to get up close and personal with a monster, clubbing it to death with whatever improvised weapon they had on hand. It made us far better suited to guarding this sector than any other group.

I'd expected it would just be us, but it turned out Benjamin was giving me a few extra people to help out.

"Hello, sir! I'm Marcus. Mr. Fisher said that we were supposed to help you however you needed." A young man came up and saluted me. The clumsy way he did it told me he probably wasn't one of Ben's military vets, but Examine showed that he'd proved his worth so far in the integration.

Marcus (Human) - Level 4

"Good to meet you, Marcus. And I'm pleased to accept help from you and your friends,"

Marcus had brought half-a-dozen of his friends with him, most of which were on the younger side. There were five men and three women, and they all seemed to be in better shape than I usually expected of office workers—but that could just have been the effect of the free stat points the System had distributed.

All in all, I was pleased to have them as backup. But I wasn't completely confident in their ability to hold their own part of the line like I was with Sakura, Frank, and Bridget who stood beside me.

We were still introducing ourselves when a message flashed before all of our eyes.

Settlement Establishment Quest Initiated!

Would you like to join in the Establishment of Miyamoto Offices Shelter?

I selected yes, and several new features appeared before my vision.

Earn Contribution Points for your participation in the settlement establishment quest! These contribution points may be traded for rewards at the Obelisk upon successful completion of the Settlement Establishment Quest.

Current Contribution Points: 0

Seven hours remaining until quest completion.

I dismissed the quest and a counter appeared in the corner of my eye and started ticking down.

59... 58... 57... 56...

I saw others peering away from their screens and into the shadows. In the dark alleys between the buildings we guarded, a thousand glowing eyes lit up and stared back at us.

The glowing eyes in the alley soon resolved themselves into hundreds of scurrying cockroaches. I turned to Marcus and the other gunners. This would be their best chance to gain some easy levels.

"Open fire!" I shouted.

Marcus was the first to pull the trigger, but the others soon followed suit. Ben had been fairly meticulous about who was armed and who wasn't, and everyone who'd gotten a weapon was someone who at least had a passing familiarity with how to use it.

But that still meant the armed people at my side were at a variety of skill levels, some better and some worse. Of the first volley, only Marcus' shot hit a cockroach. I winced and nodded to Sakura, Frank, and Bridget who fanned out near all the gaps in the barricades. It looked like we'd be finishing off most of these bugs the hard way.

Despite my initial impression, my troops got a lot better over the next few minutes. Maybe they'd just been a little rusty or needed to adjust to the unfamiliar guns in their hands. Whatever the explanation, I was pleased to see them start hitting their targets and thinning the herd heading our way.

You have slain [Cockroach - Level 1] x37

You have slain [Cockroach Scavenger - Level 2] x12

Unlike normal cockroaches, these had no fear of me. They charged at me, completely disregarding their own safety, just like all the others. Given my level, their deaths were assured. And yet they ran at me anyway. Looking left and right, the same was true for all my allies.

I alternated between using Mana Bolt and stabbing or stomping on the cockroaches. I didn't want to drain my mana too much, despite the depths of my reserves. We had hours to go, after all, and our enemies' strength would only increase from here.

The few times cockroaches actually broke through our line by crawling under or over a barricade, I finished them off with a Mana Bolt and kept our line strong. I even kept an eye on the left and right flank, lending a few bolts where needed to help them whenever they were having trouble. People were gaining levels left and right, including Bridget. Unfortunately, my next level eluded me. When the time came to make our move against Craig, I was hoping to be the same level as him.

The cockroach wave slowly faded, and by the time the first half-hour was up, it had slowed to hardly more than a trickle.

"Ha, I gained another level! This isn't so tough!" Marcus laughed as he held his hand up and high fived some of the other riflemen.

"Hold that celebration! There's a lot more coming our way!" I shouted.

Our gunners swapped out every half-hour or so, usually when they leveled up. We were a bit short staffed, despite the number of survivors. There hadn't been enough time to train everyone on how to use a gun safely, and Ben didn't want anyone to be a danger to their allies.

So, the only people handling a firearm were those who knew how to use them. But we had no shortage of support staff, and a dozen people stood back, ready to repair the barricade, bring water, or reload guns for those who knew how to fire them. As a result, we made the best use of the forces we had—though I still encouraged everyone to do a little more.

“Clear the left kill zone. You four, you look tough enough to smash a cockroach with a stick. Here.” I snatched a piece of scrap wood up from the pile intended for barricade repairs. I shoved it into the arms of a young woman who stood near the back and trembled with fear.

The woman who I shoved the scrap wood at paled. “B-but... those are monsters.”

“Monsters that die to one good bash. And more importantly, monsters that give you levels when you smash them,” I replied. “You kill these things, and you'll gain levels. You gain levels and surviving is going to be easier.”

“B-but... what if they pull us down and bite us?”

“Then I'll deal with them. Ben said you all had been hand-selected because you'd follow my orders and had a good head on your shoulders. I want to keep you and all the children and non-combatants in the shelter up there safe. If I have to throw you over the walls and make you squash bugs so you're strong enough to help, that's just what I'll

do.”

Ben hadn't hand-selected anyone, truthfully. There just wasn't time for him to get to know everyone in the shelter. But making them think that Ben thought they were capable of what I wanted them to do would boost their confidence.

The woman still looked hesitant, though the expressions of the others were starting to firm. I turned to them.

“If she goes down and giant cockroaches start attacking her, will you help protect her?” The other men and women nodded.

I picked the woman up and tossed her over the barricade. She screamed in fright but landed directly on top of a cockroach. Her ass squished the bug into paste, and green blood sprayed up her dress.

“Ahhh! Wait, I leveled up?” She stared into the distance in surprise. I took out the other two bugs approaching her while she stared at her System screen.

I turned to the others. “Well? You guys said you'd help protect her.”

I was done playing nice. Shielding these people from the harsh reality of our new world would only hurt them in the long run. It was time to throw them in the deep end of the pool and see who would sink and who would swim.

At first, having people fighting with makeshift weapons like we were hurt the rate we were killing things. But these were only cockroaches, and our enemies would get

stronger from here. These level ones would grow powerful far faster than I would for killing these cockroaches, and having a couple extra level threes or fours at our back when things got tough might make the difference between being overrun and weathering the quest successfully.

I was surprised to find just how thirsty and hungry fighting waves of monsters for an hour straight had made me. But the moment I brought that up, a runner from inside the office came out with water bottles and handed them to everyone on the front lines. Shortly thereafter, the water was followed by waves of snacks. We took shifts between eating and shooting

I was pretty sure you didn't normally take a break for lunch in the middle of a battle, and some of the former military guys refused the food as they kept their eyes locked on the shadowed alleys. But so far, the attacks hadn't been all that bad, and we had six more hours to go. This was no normal battle, either. As far as I was concerned, these early waves of monsters served only to level us up so we were strong enough to fight the real foes that would be headed our way later.

"What are those things!?" Marcus shouted.

I looked where he was pointing and saw the giant squirrels I'd fought before. It looked like we were going to be fighting more than just giant cockroaches now.

The first of them came into sight not long after.

Fire Squirrel - Level 4

Dozens of Fire Squirrels appeared, all of them spitting fireballs. The first one hit one of the gunners and he collapsed backward screaming in pain. His entire face was blistered

and swollen. He'd heal, but he was out of the fight. Perhaps those fireballs weren't so harmless, after all. I must have underestimated just how much my high vitality had protected me when we encountered these things on the street.

Marcus dropped his gun to drag our wounded to safety, and I pointed my hand to fire a Mana Bolt at the Fire Squirrel's open jaw, smashing bone and teeth. That disrupted the second fireball it was trying to throw our way.

"Take cover behind the barricades!" I called out. "That's what they're there for!" We'd gotten soft fighting the cockroaches that just blindly charged us without being able to attack until they actually reached us.

Fortunately, once we adjusted, we made short work of the Fire Squirrels.

I was largely immune to their attacks. I could dodge most of them, and any time I messed up, my Deflect spell saved me from getting struck. Besides that brief period before I could refresh the spell, I could stand in front of the barricades without fear.

They also had to stand in place for quite a while to generate a fireball, which meant they were vulnerable to return fire. The fireballs traveled slow enough that our people could duck in time to dodge them—while the fire squirrels couldn't do the same to the bullets and mana blasts we sent in reply.

Though the squirrels outnumbered us ten to one, they trickled in just a few at a time, and we had the superior position. Between superior weaponry and superior positioning, we slaughtered the enemy as they came.

As the quest reached its halfway mark, I must've killed hundreds of cockroaches and dozens of squirrels. It seemed like everyone had leveled up except for me, with most of

the people who started at level one getting their next level multiple times. I received plenty of proficiency improvements, but my levels continued to elude me.

Your Caster proficiency has reached level 6!

Your Neutral Mana proficiency has reached 5!

Your Rifle proficiency has reached level 3!

Your Improvised Weapons proficiency has reached level 4!

We passed the next four-hour mark, granting everyone another boost of +1 to their stats across the board. While it didn't do much for Bridget, Frank, or Sakura, it helped everyone else considerably. It even helped me, since it pushed my Strength, Charisma, and Willpower just one point away from ten, leaving only agility lagging behind.

The woman I'd quite literally thrown into battle had reached level three, and her new stats gave her renewed confidence. Her limbs no longer shook when she stared at the cockroaches, and she now had the look of a survivor in her eyes. I was pretty sure she was nursing a grudge against me, but I was willing to have her hate me if it meant she could better help us protect the shelter.

Just when I was starting to wonder if I was getting any points at all from killing low-level creatures, my level up finally came to me.

Congratulations! You have reached level 9!

You have four new stat points to distribute.

Sakura turned and saw the look on my face as I dismissed the System notification. After watching others level up, we'd all started recognizing the happy look followed by a distant stare as someone stepped back from the fighting to go through System messages. "Did you finally get your level?"

I grinned back at her. Insect and squirrel blood were splattered across her clothes, but somehow not a drop of it had landed on her smiling face.

"Yep! You're looking at a level 9."

A cheer went up from our entire force. Everyone was happy that I'd gotten stronger, since I was the highest-level person there. Even those I'd thrown into battle seemed happy. They were probably just happy that I had more power to cover their asses if they screwed up, but they were still happy for me.

I was pleased for another reason though. Now, I was the same level as Craig. When we fought, I wouldn't be at a disadvantage.

"Congratulations, Carter!" Sakura said.

Bridget echoed her praise a moment later.

I stepped back from the fighting to assign those skill points. It was time to invest in my

other abilities and push some of those stats over ten to secure some new abilities.

Congratulations on reaching a Strength milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with a strength skill book!

Choose a Strength skill book!

- **Book of Power Jump (Common) - Momentarily enhances leg strength to allow greater leaps and jumps.**
- **Book of Sturdy Footing (Common) - Strengthens the ground beneath the user's feet, ensuring it is stable and is less likely to give way beneath them when increased force is exerted on it.**
- **Book of Power Stomp (Common) - An enhanced crushing attack that is particularly effective against small to medium size insect monsters.**

I didn't see Sakura's weapon-enhancing ability anywhere. She must have unlocked that by destroying the table leg she'd been using as a weapon before switching to her baseball bat.

Power Stomp might have been useful to me when I was still fighting cockroaches, but at this point, Mana Bolt could take them out without me even needing to touch the bugs, so I had little interest in it. Sturdy Footing seemed more like a required secondary power for people who used a lot of strength skills. It might not matter much now, but if Strength stats could get someone to the point where they could lift a bus, they would need a power like this to prevent their feet from sinking into the ground when they did so.

No, the best choice for me was Power Jump. It would let me leap out of danger, which was just the sort of thing I needed as a primarily ranged magical combatant. I didn't

want to get up close and personal with my enemies. This ability would let me jump out of the way if I was ever in that sort of situation.

I selected Power Jump. Next, I looked at the Willpower offerings.

Congratulations on reaching a Willpower milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with a Willpower skill book!

Choose a Willpower skill book!

- **Book of Iron Will (Common) - Allows the user to exert stats all the way to their thresholds without suffering the debilitating effects normally associated with doing so.**
- **Book of Intimidate (Common) - Provides a chance to force others to comply with your demands, even if what you demand is against their own interest. Effective only against those appreciably lower in level.**
- **Book of Resist Seduction (Common) - Allows the user to be dramatically less susceptible to seduction or seduction-related mind control and persuasion abilities.**

Intimidate sounded like the kind of ability Craig would pick, and for that reason I dismissed it. The real surprise came when I saw the Resist Seduction skill. Just how had I unlocked that ability? And what was that about seduction-related mind control? Was that something I had to worry about?

I knew of a lot of games that had a spell like Charm or Seduce, but I hadn't been

thinking they were the sort of thing I'd need to deal with in the real world. Perhaps that had been naive. I would have to think about raising my Willpower more.

Ultimately, I ended up going with Iron Will. I remembered what that headache had felt like when I'd gotten close to exhausting my mana pool. And I remembered being nearly helpless when my health points got too low after that rat bite. Being wounded, weakened, or depleted sucked—and I wanted something to mitigate the effects. From the looks of things, that's just what Iron Will provided.

Congratulations on reaching a Charisma milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with a charisma skill book!

Chose a Charisma skill book!

- **Hope's Herald (Common) - Enhances the positive feelings of those around the user.**
- **Persuasion (Common) - Makes other people more open minded when hearing your opinions.**
- **Fabulous Phallus (Common) - All sexual activities the user participates in are far more pleasurable for partners. Warning: After experiencing this skill, women may find it impossible to be satisfied by ordinary men.**
- **Aphrodisiac Pheromones (Common) - Arouses the opposite sex, making them more compliant and less resistant to the user's demands.**

My eyes skipped straight to the bottom of the list. Aphrodisiac Pheromones? Like with Resist Seduction, how had I unlocked that ability?

It seemed like this was exactly the type of power that Resist Seduction was meant to block. I would have to be on my guard for anything like this from anyone else. In the future, I would have to remember to watch out for anyone who looked like they had a lot of points in Charisma and constantly monitor my feelings around them to make sure I wasn't being manipulated.

As for Fabulous Phallus, that would either be useless or a more direct version of the same thing, depending on how good I was in bed. Oddly, the temptation was there, but it would be crazy to waste something as valuable as a skill on something like this.

The other two abilities were both useful. Hope's Herald sounded excellent for the leader of a settlement, like Ben or Margaret. I wasn't too interested in it, though, since its combat utility didn't seem all that apparent.

Between the two, Persuasion was the logical choice. I'd probably unlocked it by sitting through those meetings with Ben and the others. Out of all my skills, it was probably the one most applicable to my old life.

Still, I didn't expect to be doing that kind of thing very often anymore. How much use would I really get out of a Persuasion skill that I couldn't get with my own natural abilities?

I sighed. Oh well. Charisma was usually a dump stat anyway. I guess I might as well get a mediocre persuasion skill that I'd only use occasionally. I flicked my hand toward the screen with my attention already wandering.

You have selected Fabulous Phallus.

What?! Oh well, I guess my hand slipped. I'd just have to live with it, since there was no way to change my selection now.

You have chosen not to undo your skill selection.

Fabulous Phallus skill now downloading...

I had no regrets, though I'd have to make sure not to share my skill screen with anyone. I already planned on hiding it because of that Deflect spell I was counting on to save my ass in a time of need, but now I had a reason to be too embarrassed to share it, too.

I closed my menus and felt a sharp pain in my head and thighs as the skills took hold. It was a good pain, though. These new skills would make surviving this apocalypse a lot easier. That was when I had a moment of sudden dread. The parts of my body that hurt were the parts that were affected by the skills I just got. Which meant...

"God damn it!" I yelled, stumbling behind the nearest barricade and crouching in the mud.

"What's wrong?" Sakura ran over, worry written plain on her face.

"I'm fine..." I grunted through clenched teeth.

One of the guys must have recognized the look on my face, because he put a hand on Sakura's shoulder and shook his head.

I stood a moment later. Like with the other skills, this one was gone as quickly as it had

come. It was just the place that pain had come from that made the experience uncomfortable. I had to reassure everyone I was fine, especially Sakura.

"It's okay, everyone. Getting three new skills all at once hurt a bit more than I expected. I'm fine now."

"...Good. You're standing a little funny though..." Sakura said as she looked me up and down.

"I... uh... got a jumping skill. Power Jump," I said. I had just promised not to share my skills with anyone, but Power Jump would be revealed as soon as I started using it. Besides, I had to throw Sakura off the trail.

"I see..." Sakura said in a way that carried a bucket-load of suspicion. Fortunately, she dropped the subject, and we continued fighting cockroaches and squirrels.

A knot of worry needled at me as the quest ticked on. We were getting closer to sunset, and the enemies were getting stronger. I had reached level nine, which meant Craig had to be getting close to level 10.

We'd agreed to deal with him before he reached level ten, because we didn't know what powers gaining a class title held. We were pretty sure of one thing though—it would make him a lot harder to kill.

So why hadn't Ben given the signal yet?

I'd been keeping myself nearly full of mana and avoided going all-out, so I was ready to

join Ben and the others at a moment's notice. But the signal never came. What was going on?

Surely Craig was as weakened as we were going to get him. I'd gone from hearing a gunshot every minute from his side of the building to one every half-an-hour or so. He was probably conserving his last bullets.

Overhead, the sky went from blue to orange, and the waves of monsters grew denser. I looked at the quest message on my system screen.

Quest time remaining: Three hours.

Just when I'd started worrying that the lack of light would affect our gunner's aim, the lights came on in the office, and a floodlight shone down from overhead into our kill zone. The light blinded the monsters heading our way, making them easy targets.

"Hell yeah! Looks like the guys in the rear got that generator working!" Marcus yelled. Sure enough, I heard the drone of a motor on the third floor.

"Can you guys handle the last of these squirrels on your own? I've heard a few too many shouts on the right flank," I said. "I'm going to see if they need reinforcements."

"We've got these guys, Carter!" Bridget replied.

Marcus gave a nod, as did Sakura and Frank.

With my companions willing to cover my absence and our people healthy enough to deal with all incoming enemies for the moment, I headed off to check on the other flanks and look for Ben. The lack of news about Craig was starting to worry me.

First, I checked on the right-hand side of the office building, opposite Craig's front. I'd heard some screaming from there earlier and figured Ben might be busy reinforcing them. When I arrived, I saw no sign of Ben, but I was glad I showed up when I did. They were on the verge of being completely overrun. If I'd been a minute later, we probably would have had monsters showing up behind our barricades as whoever was left here fled, abandoning their posts. Why hadn't Ben sent these people reinforcements from the reserves?

"I'm hit! Arghhh!" A man screamed when a fireball launched from the mouth of a fire squirrel struck him. His clothes burst into flame, and he dropped his gun while running and screaming on fire.

"Roll!" I shouted. "Drop to the ground, cover your face, and roll!"

The man was too panicked to hear me, so I pushed him to the ground and rolled him with my boot on his back. That put the fire out.

The man was hyperventilating and shivering in terror, with blistered skin and burnt hair, but he would live. People with a vitality below eight or so couldn't shrug off the fireballs like those of us with higher-level vitality could.

I gestured to two riflemen hiding behind their positions as wave after wave of fireballs washed over the defenses. They didn't dare stick their heads up to return fire.

"You two! Drag this man back to the office for treatment. And while you're there, get

them to send our reserve forces out here!”

The two I shouted orders at were almost as terrified as the man who'd nearly burned alive. The two men glanced at my armband. Their shell-shocked minds took a moment to register as orders.

“Come on, hop to it!” I shouted, ducking to the side as a fireball soared past where I'd been standing a moment before.

The front was badly understaffed, with one man wounded and two more pulling him to safety. Nearby, I saw two burned and unrecognizable bodies. Until those reinforcements arrived, it would just be me, two riflemen, and a couple of frightened civilian assistants.

Worse, the assistants on this flank hadn't used the earlier waves to grab a few easy levels, so they were still level one. Their vitality was low enough that a single fireball would be enough to take them down, just like the bodies nearby.

At first glance, the position this group was defending was far easier than the one my group guarded. The center of their flank was protected by a giant brick wall, which meant they only needed to watch from two locations, both fairly large and with a wide-open kill zone perfect for gunning down enemies.

But at some point, they'd slipped up. They weren't killing fire squirrels as fast as they were accumulating, and that had let the massive fireball spitting critters reach a critical threshold where they could continuously shoot fireballs at the defenders—to the point where none of them dared stick their heads up over the barricades to shoot back. That meant more fire squirrels accumulated, and suddenly it was all they could do to kill the cockroaches sneaking past the barricades.

Things were looking grim, and in another minute or two, they would have been completely overwhelmed. At that point, it wouldn't matter if my people and I held our flank without issues. The office would be overrun, the non-combatants slain, and the quest lost.

I was once again worried about Ben and the plan. He should have seen these people's dire situation and deployed the reserve. Where was he?

I put that thought out of my mind for the moment. Right now, I needed to turn the tide, which would probably take everything I had—including those new skills, I had just picked up.

"You! By the barricades. Pull back and tighten the ring of desks." I said to the few shivering survivors. I picked up a dropped pistol. Blood was on the grip and a couple of cockroaches were licking at it. It had been near the burning man I had saved, so I figured he wouldn't need it. I scooped it up off the ground after stomping on the bugs, since my rifle was a two-handed weapon and I wanted something I could use while casting Mana Bolt.

The remaining gunmen scrambled to safety, as the civilians supporting them with clubs and improvised weapons moved to tighten the barricade and put out the pieces of it that were on fire.

"Where are you going?" One of the people asked as I placed one foot on an upturned desk that served as part of the barricade.

"I'm going to draw fire from those squirrels. Do your best not to shoot me in the back," I growled.

And with that, I pushed myself off the lip of the desk, leaping over it in one bound. Power jump would have been a hell-of-a-lot-of-fun when I was a teenager. My standing jump took me twice my own height in the air and four times that in distance. It felt much like what I imagined it would be like to jump on the moon.

I landed right in the open, surrounded by fire squirrels. Their reaction was surprise, followed by a hail of fireballs, but I was already moving.

The fireballs were moving just about on the edge of what was possible for a normal human to dodge. It was possible to duck out of the way if you saw it coming early enough. But at level 9, I could hardly be considered a normal human anymore. With the enhancements to my perception and agility, the fireballs seemed to come at me at half speed, like they were traveling through water instead of air.

Three of them washed harmlessly by me, while the fourth triggered my Deflection spell, swatting it aside. That left me vulnerable, but I'd gotten used to fighting these things and knew I had a few precious moments before the next wave of fireballs came. And a few moments was all I needed.

I fired the pistol with one hand and activated Mana Bolt with the other. I twisted in place, becoming a whirlwind of death and destruction as I rained bullets and magic down on the enemies encircling me.

With them so close, I couldn't miss. I blasted holes in three of them, causing mortal wounds in all three. Then I used Power Jump to leap over their heads and land behind those that remained, unleashing another deadly barrage of attacks on the fire-spitting tree rodents.

The squirrels whirled on me, their fireballs scorched my arm and chest. My skin sizzled, but I could weather the damage with my vitality so long as I dodged most of them. Iron

Will helped me fight through the pain, especially since I knew I could heal it away at any moment by burning my mana for health.

And that moment came shortly after that thought, when I used Mind over Flesh to convert some of my mana into health points. I felt my wounds begin to heal with supernatural speed. I fired another barrage of bullets and mana bolts just as the first batch of fire squirrels were breathing their last gasps.

You have slain [Fire Squirrel - Level 5] x 6

You have gained the Pistol proficiency.

You have gained the Regeneration proficiency.

The remaining beasts came at me with teeth and claws once they realized I was shrugging off their fireballs. But much like me, these creatures had thrown their stats into magic rather than physical attacks. I kicked one aside before using Power Jump to put some distance between the snarling squirrels the size of dogs and me.

I took a moment to recast Deflect and regain the protection that the defensive spell gave me, then I unloaded the rest of the bullets in my pistol into the nearest fire squirrel. It hissed, spluttered, and died. That was one less enemy, but now when I pulled the trigger to my pistol, all I got was an empty click. I was out of bullets.

I suppose that was part of the problem with guns, at least for me. A true gun nut would have counted his shots as he pulled the trigger, but someone like me would get caught with their metaphorical pants down when their gun suddenly stopped working in the middle of combat.

And that was when the gun was working correctly. I had to pull a few of the riflemen on my side out of a sticky situation when their guns jammed. It made me feel a bit like a medieval knight scorning the invention of the musket, but I just couldn't see myself investing too heavily in mastering firearms—not when the alternative was being able to shoot bolts of magic out of my hand.

I threw the pistol at the nearest squirrel, bashing it in the head. That did little, but the Mana Bolt I followed it up with looked like it hurt. Reaching for my belt, I grabbed the knife I'd looted from the gun store earlier that day. It was a lot bigger than the thing I'd made my makeshift spear from, and when I drew it, the weapon just felt right in my hand. The weight in my palm was even more comforting than the discarded pistol had been.

What was effectively a short sword and Mana Bolt felt like a more comfortable combination for me. I didn't have to work so hard to keep my distance with a weapon in my hand. The teeth and claws of these giant squirrels were nothing compared to a knife as long as my forearm, and any that dared close the distance between us got a heavy slash across their fuzzy maws for their bravery.

Eventually, the squirrels fought me mage to mage, pitting their fireballs against my Mana Bolts. I dodged, weaved, and deflected fireballs while the fire squirrels took hit after hit. Before long, they collapsed to the ground, battered and bloody as though they'd been pelted with rocks the size of my head. At my current Caster proficiency, that was probably what getting hit by my Mana Bolts felt like.

You have slain [Fire Squirrel - Level 5] x16

You have slain [Cockroach Scavenger - Level 2] x25

The cockroaches were barely worth mentioning since they died to either a Mana Bolt or a good stomp. I would have preferred to use a Mana Bolt, but I ended up playing it safe with my mana reserves and giving them a good stomp more often than I would have liked.

During the battle, I'd entered an odd state. It was reminiscent of meditation, except it was far better than any meditation session I'd ever tried before. There was something oddly Zen about throwing all of my concentration into a life-and-death battle where I had to fight with everything I had.

The fight was over before I knew it. When I looked for my next foe, there were none to be found. I stood in the open space, bloody, battered, burned, and covered in the blood of my enemies. Walking back to the barricade, I found the reinforcements I'd called for standing there in shock.

They weren't firing, though. Instead, they stood slack-jawed with awe and fright on their faces as they stared back at me. I supposed it was like watching professional athletes at work. With my stats, I could do things that hadn't been possible before the System. Still, they shouldn't stare that much. It was just a few low-level monsters.

"Do any of you guys have a towel?" I asked as I gestured to the blood in my hair and on my face. "I want to get some of this off me before it dries."

"Y-yes, sir!" a man said, tearing his shirt free and offering it to me. I shrugged and used it to wipe the blood and goo off me. It came free far more easily than it probably should have, and a quick scrub was all it took to wipe myself clean enough to feel like I'd just taken a shower.

"I take it you can take things from here, right? Don't let those squirrels gang up on you again. Thin them out before they become a problem."

“U-understood, sir!” the man stuttered.

“Good. I’m going to go look for Ben.”

Behind me, I heard one of them whisper. I wouldn’t have heard it without my enhanced Perception stats.

“Are we sure he’s really a human? Maybe he’s one of the monsters in human form?”

The man who’d given me his shirt shushed the other. “Just be glad he’s on our side.”

After asking if any of them had seen Ben, I ended up walking around to the sector guarding the front. They were doing much better than the side I’d just helped, but they still looked like they needed a hand.

I had hoped that the reason why Ben hadn’t reinforced the people I’d just helped was because he was busy helping the defenders guarding the front, but that didn’t look like that was the case. There was no sign of Ben. Nor any of Stacy, Brett, and Michael, the three high-leveled individuals outside of my little group of survivors.

I did spot Margaret in front of the building. Ben had placed her in charge here. In truth, I thought she’d be little more than a figurehead, but she must have gone down to the shooting range with Ben more often than I’d given her credit for.

She was picking off Fire Squirrels one at a time before promptly ducking back under

cover. Those fireballs were a lot scarier for lower leveled people since they couldn't just shrug off the attacks and keep fighting like I could. They also didn't have my Deflect spell, so they had a smaller margin of error for dodging these things.

"Margaret, where's Ben?" I asked as I crouched behind an upturned desk beside her.

Margaret didn't respond. Her eyes were focused on her gun, which had jammed a moment ago. She'd pulled the magazine from it in frantic haste and was smacking it against her palm.

"Margaret?" I asked.

"Monsters... there's so many..." Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, knuckles white as she clutched her weapon. A stuck shell finally fell out of the gun, and she peeked over the barrier again to keep shooting.

I realized then that if I wanted a response out of her, I'd need to clear the battlefield just like I had before. With a muttered curse, I jumped up from the barricade, immediately drawing fireballs. But by now, dodging them had become as easy as breathing. I didn't even end up using my Deflect spell.

You have slain [Fire Squirrel - Level 5]! x 5

I used Power Jump to close the distance with the last of them and slashed its side wide open with my blade before finishing it off with a Mana Bolt to the face. I thought that would be the end, but something small, black, and much faster than any of the squirrels rushed me with its maw wide open.

I dodged out of the way with Power Jump, flinging a Mana Bolt at it when it missed me. It tumbled through the air and ended up sprawled on its side, its vulnerable underbelly facing upwards. I wasn't about to let that opening slip by, so I jumped on top of it and plunged my sword deep into its guts. I didn't even realize what it was until it was dying.

Giant Rat - Level 6.

It seemed like a new wave of monsters was trickling in. In fact, this rat looked just like the rat matriarch when I'd fought her last. But now, instead of just one of them, there were dozens of creatures, all at her old level. Worse, with more fire squirrels still trickling in, these rats could charge the defenses under the cover of fireballs. That would keep our riflemen from gunning them down with impunity.

It was an unfortunate combination that would make things exponentially more difficult for the defenders. I just hoped everyone had gained enough levels to make it through this. The civilian fighters, especially, would need to step it up if some of those rats made it all the way to the barricade. I hoped they'd been putting points into strength and vitality.

The number of times I had to use Mana Bolt had me finally dipping into my reserves, so I snatched a discarded pistol off the ground and took a few shots with it, instead. My aim wasn't particularly good compared to the others, but I could stand up in front of the barriers without worrying about the fireballs, unlike the others who had to hop up and shoot quickly for fear of the—literal—return fire.

With my help, the field was gradually cleared. I even grabbed a few of the civilians, thrust a couple of sticks in their hands, and told them to bash any cockroaches coming through. Most of the ones arriving now were of the Scavenger Cockroach variant, so those at level one would be at a disadvantage. That was the price they had to pay for not grabbing easy levels earlier, though, back when we were only up against level-one cockroaches.

Eventually, we got the situation at the front of the building under control.

“Margaret, I need your help. Where’s Benjamin?” I asked when our enemies had thinned enough that she could catch her breath. I had to pull her back from the front lines before she would take a break.

“I... I don’t know where Ben is. He should be in the office still. He said it was time to see to Craig. He took everyone with the highest levels from here and the flank to our right. He said we’d waited as long as he dared, and that we’d gained as many levels as we could before risking Craig reaching level 10. I thought he was going to visit you next, but I guess he didn’t if you’re here.”

I frowned. “How long ago was this?”

It was possible I’d missed him and that he’d gone to check on me at the same time I’d gone to look for him.

“I... I don’t know. It felt like hours ago.”

“Do you remember how much time was left on the quest timer?”

Margaret shrugged. “I don’t know...”

“Come with me, then. We need to find him.”

“Right... Right...” Margaret took a few deep breaths, her expression settling into firm determination as I tugged her along behind me toward the office doors.

By the time we actually made it there, she was the one dragging me behind her. We arrived at the front door, and she rapped on it three times with the butt of her rifle. “Hello? We’re coming in! Just confirming that we’re humans and not monsters.”

We waited outside the door for a few moments in silence. Even covered by the barricades, Margaret didn’t like standing up in the open like this.

“Was someone supposed to reply?”

Margaret nodded.

We waited a few moments more before I got impatient and tried the doorknob. It was unlocked, and I swung it open.

Margaret stepped through first. The moment she entered the doorway, she froze. I had to squeeze past her to get through, but the moment I did, I smelled the reason she stopped. The air was thick with the metallic scent of blood.

I gently pushed Margaret aside, heart rate beating faster. Maybe the smell of blood was just coming from the wounded. This was where we’d been taking everyone who got injured, after all.

I listened and heard nothing. There were no moans of pain, and no sounds of medics scrambling to care for the dead and dying. Just... silence.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

I took a left turn and soon realized why. The moment I opened the door to the law office, I saw a river of blood and the bodies.

Dead people lay stacked on top of each other like so much garbage. They splayed back on themselves, twisted backward in positions that would have been impossible to maintain if they'd been alive.

Broken arms, legs, and necks abounded. Most of these people had been beaten to death. Not by monsters, though. No, monsters would have tried to eat them.

A few Scavenger Cockroaches had wandered the room, but they weren't the culprits behind this mess. I could tell by the splintered wood and the shape of the attacks that they'd come from improvised weapons. These folks had been killed by their fellow humans.

Blood sloshed along the floor in a knuckle-deep puddle that coated the room. All the wounded we'd sent back here for healing were dead, along with the children and the elderly we'd rescued. Not a single one of them was still alive, though the bodies were still warm to the touch.

I'd hardly felt anything when putting down those giant cockroaches. Fighting those giant rats had been exhilarating and Adrenalin-inducing. Even killing those murderers in the street had been an act of necessity. But now, for the first time, I felt true disgust at the carnage around me and grieved at the needless loss of life. Who would do this?

My heart pounded faster. I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

I took another glance at the bodies, seeing the pain and fear still etched on their faces in death. I had a strong stomach, but I couldn't look any longer. To think, everything all the people outside were fighting for was already gone. Should we give up on the quest?

"Noooooooo!" Margaret screamed from behind me.

She held her hand over her mouth, eyes wide in horror.

I followed her gaze to the center of the room. Laying atop one of the largest piles of bodies, Ben sprawled on his back, his glassy eyes wide open. His face was pale, and there was a bullet hole between his eyes.

My eyes darted to her, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise as a second later something whizzed at me, triggering my deflect spell and slamming into the ground nearby. Whatever it was splashed my pant leg with blood as it dug a hole into the floor. After today, I'd heard that sound enough to recognize it at a glance. Someone had just tried to shoot me.

"Get down!" I yelled.

Margaret stumbled toward the pile of bodies, falling on top of her dead husband.

I turned and slid behind the nearest office desk, putting something between the shooter and me.

A moment later, the shooter emerged. He was covered, head to toe, in red human blood. Each step splattered the red pool beneath him a little further. I heard his pistol slide slam forward as he chambered another round. Despite the blood, I recognized the man. His cheap sunglasses and massive frame were impossible to mistake for anyone else in the office.

“Now that was just bullshit. I know I shot you in the damn head...” Craig chuckled darkly.

“Give up, Carter. You can’t win. Might as well let me make this quick,” Craig chuckled.

He stalked his way through the halls, and I wove through the door to the adjacent office as quietly as I could. I just needed to buy ten seconds. Once I had Deflect equipped again, I’d be much more confident facing Craig down.

I took a survey of my options. First, I could make my way out of the office. Most of the windows had been boarded up, but I could pry a few loose, if given some time. Or I could make my way for the door.

But then what? Craig would still be a problem.

Should I fight him? The answer to that was obviously yes. He’d stabbed us in the back, murdered Ben, and then killed all the innocent non-combatants we were protecting when our backs were turned. Craig deserved to die.

No. He didn’t just deserve to die, he deserved to suffer as he passed. But I would settle for just taking him out of the picture. So yes, I should fight him. But could I? That was the real question.

Ten seconds passed, and I recast Deflect.

I peeked my eye around the corner to get a good look at Craig. He fired a shot at me immediately. It would have hit me right in the eye, if I hadn't reactivated Deflect.

"Damn it! Is this thing fucking broken?" Craig cursed as he stared at his pistol.

I hadn't used my Deflection for nothing, though. I'd gotten a good look at him with Examine.

Gunslinger Bandit (Craig) - Level 12

"After you're dead, I'll be top dog of this entire area," Craig said once he had another round chambered. "I wonder how long it will take for those two girls of yours to come crawling to my crew for shelter?"

He laughed, and it was not a happy sound. "I was going to take in Bridget, even after our little fight, but after seeing Sakura again? Wow, she turned into a real hottie overnight. Not tempting to me, mind you. I have high standards, and demand only the finest bitches with eager and submissive temperaments. But maybe she'd win the heart of one of my men who doesn't care as much about a woman's personality as I do. Although, I think it'd be funny to make the former head-bitch of our company the designated shit scooper of my new tribe. Imagine her spending every day hauling chamber pots out of the office that used to be hers every day! It's going to be hilarious."

I turned, pointed my finger, and shot Craig with Mana Bolt. Unlike his attacks, mine landed dead in the center of his chest and knocked him backward with almost as much

force as one of Sakura's baseball bat blows. It tore a hole through the bulletproof vest on his chest and bruised the skin beneath.

That one's for you, Sakura.

At my current Caster proficiency, Mana Bolt was finally strong enough to function much like a bullet against weaker foes, like cockroaches and Fire Squirrels. Unfortunately, Craig was too strong to kill like that. Maybe I could whittle down his health points a little at a time, though.

Craig returned fire, but he missed again, thanks to Deflect. I needed to keep him talking between every exchange. With a three level disadvantage, I needed every edge I could get.

"How did you reach level twelve so fast?" I demanded.

Craig's first reply was a bullet. It shot straight through the wall behind me and would have struck where my head would have been, if I'd been standing. But I wasn't standing. I was crouched against the wall and ready to run at the slightest hint of a whisper.

I glanced up at the hole. From what I'd seen earlier, he was firing hollow points. The office walls weren't particularly tough, but the bullets still shouldn't have that kind of penetrating power. That meant he was using a class ability. It made sense that Gunslinger Bandits would have abilities that enhanced their bullets.

Now that I thought about it, it didn't even look like Craig was aiming. Every one of his shots had been fired from the hip. He shouldn't have been able to hit a damn thing like that, and yet he'd nearly blown my head off every chance he got.

An icy feeling gripped my heart. Could I win this fight?

“Turns out, killing traitors grants way more levels than killing monsters,” Craig replied. “When I interrupted Ben and his little plan to ambush me, I was pissed. Pissed enough to do things I wouldn’t tell my momma about, that’s for damn sure. I killed Ben and all his chumps.”

“You are a monster,” I spat.

Craig laughed. “Don’t take the high road. They were planning on killing me, after all... as were you. My man on the inside told me you were there at the meeting. I timed things just right so Ben would have all his weaklings gathered together but hadn’t gone to get you yet. I was still level nine at that point, you see. I didn’t want anyone who could put up a proper fight. Not when I was busy power leveling.”

My heart leaped when I heard him talk about his man on the inside. We’d been betrayed—that was how all this happened. My mind flashed back to that gathering, and there was only one man who’d excused himself from our meeting. Michael.

“It was Michael, wasn’t it? I asked, reequipping Deflect to ready myself for another engagement. “The pest control guy.” I turned, shot Craig with a mana bolt, and then ducked out of the way just as fast.

“Ouch! Fuck you,” Craig snarled. “But yeah. It was him. Bit of a whiny bastard, to be honest. I told him he’d proved his loyalty by coming to me and that he could join my crew. Only when I brought him and the boys over to off Ben and his goons, he started blabbering about how what we were about to do was wrong. Pathetic. Why’d he tell me about Ben’s plan if he didn’t want to help me kill the dude?”

Poor naïve Michael. He'd been playing by the old world's rules where there were police and courts to turn to, and law and order to be upheld. All that was gone.

It seemed Craig and I were the only people who truly realized that. For everyone else, it had yet to sink in. Michael had tried to do what he thought was right and, in the end, it got even more innocents killed—along with any hope this survival group had for building a better future.

I recast Deflect, and we exchanged blows again. A bullet for a Mana Bolt. This time, I hit Craig right in the head, and blood started leaking from his nose. Meanwhile, my scratches and singed clothes were from my previous fight outside. So far, Craig hadn't landed a scratch on me.

"Alright, screw you. I know you're playing some trick on me. Don't take me for a fool!" He looked around the office, and eventually, his eyes turned to Margaret, who lay on the ground clutching her dead husband's hand and quietly sobbing into his chest.

A smile spread across his face as he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her off of Ben. He lifted her off the ground by a fistful of her hair. She squirmed in his grasp and punched him right in the face. But Craig took the side of his gun and whipped her across the face.

"Don't do that again, or I'll have to really mar that face of yours," Craig spat. "You don't want that. Your man is dead, which means that if you want to survive, you're going to need to press your tits together and pray you can find a new one to take care of you. You're a bit old for me, but maybe one of my boys has a mommy kink."

"You murderer!" Margaret screamed, lashing out at him again.

Craig sighed and whipped her across the face again with the side of his pistol. I shot him in the back of the head with a Mana Bolt while he was distracted, but he shrugged off the blow.

He tossed Margaret to the ground and kicked her over, stepping on her back and pinning her to the ground while she thrashed and struggled. It was useless, though. Craig's stats were so much higher than hers, that she had no hope of escape when he had her pinned.

Craig pointed his gun at Margaret's head. "Come out of hiding and face me like a man, Carter, or I'll— Awk! Stop fucking shooting me, and let me talk! I've got a damn hostage."

I blasted Craig in the face another time. I was tempted to do so again, but Craig pointed his gun at Margaret's shoulder and fired. A *bang* rang out from his pistol, and Margaret screamed in pain. Her thrashing stopped, and her resistance collapsed as she started sobbing again, like she'd been doing earlier.

"Next, one goes into the back of her head. I set that bullet to not cause too much damage, since she'll need that arm for doing laundry and cooking. But the next bullet I'm setting to kill, and it'll blow her brains out her eye sockets," Craig said.

"I'm going to shoot her in ten seconds if you don't come out and show yourself," he called out.

Heart pounding with fury and disgust, I refreshed my Deflect spell. It looked like I'd wounded Craig as much as I could. Now it was time to see who between us was the strongest for real.

“Alright, Craig, we’ll play it your way.” I stepped out into the open, and Craig turned his gun toward me with a wide grin spread across his face.

But I had already used Power Jump, and his shot hit only empty air as I closed the distance between us. With two ranged weapons, we were evenly matched in a shootout. But I intended to turn our shootout into something a lot more up close and personal. I tore my sword free from its sheath and slashed at Craig while firing Mana Bolt with my other hand. The Mana Bolt struck his wrist, knocking it toward his chest and throwing off his aim for his other shot. Then my sword landed just where I was aiming.

I wasn’t sure if it was skill, planning, or just dumb luck. I’d been hoping to hurt his hand at least, but my sword cut right through his trigger finger, completely severing it from his hand.

Craig howled in pain. He pointed his gun at me, but nothing came out of it. Without his finger, there was nothing to pull the trigger. Craig kept waving his gun at me, unable to figure out what was wrong as he pointed his weapon at my face.

I grinned and fired another Mana Bolt while slashing at his throat.

He ducked and rolled, jumping off of Margaret and setting her free to crawl away through the blood and viscera that covered the ground. The two of us fought for real, then, and the intensity of our battle reached a new fever pitch. I hacked a dozen times in the span of a single heartbeat, and Craig smashed his gun at me, using it like a club.

I dodged to the side, finding his clumsy swings even easier to slip than the Fire Squirrel’s fireballs. I could do this. I could put this bastard down once and for all. The tip

of my sword cut through his collarbone and got stuck there.

Craig howled in pain. I tried to tear the blade free, but Craig's other hand wrapped around my throat. His muscles weren't just for show. He'd probably started with an incredible strength score, and the integration had only let him push that stat higher.

He picked me up off the ground as easily as he'd hauled Margaret off her feet by her hair.

I felt the blood pressure in my skull grow as he squeezed my neck with all his might and pointed his gun at my forehead with his other hand. He still hadn't figured out why he couldn't pull the trigger.

While he tried to choke me to death, I fired Mana Bolt after Mana Bolt directly into his face. The concussive shocks rattled Craig's brain like yolk in an egg, and sooner or later, his skull was going to crack. It was just a question of which of us could hold out the longest.

I sensed my health points starting to dip from his choke hold, so I used Mind Over Flesh to recover. Craig started whipping me in the face with the barrel of his gun, now that he'd figured out it wouldn't fire, and I felt something in my mouth shatter under the continuous blows. I spat out a mouthful of broken teeth at Craig, and he leaked blood from his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes.

I finally managed to yank my sword free from his collarbone, and I thrust it toward his throat. The blood pounding in my head was too great to focus, though, and I didn't manage a direct hit. Without Iron Will, I'd have been unconscious already, but the passive skill let me keep fighting a little longer.

Whatever I'd struck made blood gush down Craig's side in a crimson river that joined the pool on the floor, but it just wasn't enough. He must have put some serious stats into Vitality to endure the beating I was dishing out. I sliced at him with my sword, cutting deep gouges along his upper body.

I knew my sword was incredibly sharp, even after stabbing a bunch of those squirrels and rats outside. But against Craig's skin, I felt like I was cutting through planks of wood instead of human flesh. Maybe Sakura could have hacked her way through it, but I was lucky to cut grooves an inch or two deep into his flesh. That was how tough Craig's body was.

I was doing ten times the damage to him as he was to me with his useless pistol as he whipped it across my face, but the raw power of levels could not be underestimated. Crossing level ten seemed to be a qualitative threshold, since he felt even stronger than I thought he should be. Maybe he had more stats, or maybe his class granted him some special abilities I didn't understand, but I realized then I wasn't Craig's match.

And yet, I had to kill him anyway. Nothing less would be acceptable.

In the end, neither of us broke the stalemate. In our fighting, we'd forgotten about Margaret crawling along the ground. She must have picked her rifle back up from where she'd dropped it next to Ben's body. Now, she knelt among the carnage and opened fire on Craig.

Bullets the size of my little finger shot out as quickly as she could pull the trigger, and three of them struck Craig's side in quick succession. I sensed my Deflect spell trigger as one of them would have hit me, but my spell redirected it to slam into Craig's wrist instead.

That finally forced him to drop me, and I fell to my knees on the ground, sucking in a

breath while the pressure in my skull eased. My entire body felt like it was going to burst apart—and before the System, I probably would have had to deal with permanent brain damage.

I used Mind Over Flesh again, draining my mana to restore my health. I started feeling the pain immediately, and my mouth almost felt normal again as my broken teeth regrew, though the ability wasn't instantaneous. It would take some time before I was restored to full health.

As bad as I felt, though, Craig looked worse. He looked like he'd decided to spin in a rock tumbler, and purple bruises covered him from head to toe. Margaret's rifle shots hadn't even pierced his skin, but like my Mana Bolts, each of them must have felt like a heavy punch. He walked unsteadily, and I knew he probably had the worst concussion imaginable.

I forced myself to my feet. Now wasn't the time to recover, it was time to finish him off. He was still higher level than I was, and if I didn't kill him now, who knew what kind of trouble he would get into.

I raised my hand, fingers shaking as I tried to aim. The spell wouldn't activate, but that was probably because I could barely focus. So I said the words aloud to sharpen my mind. My speech came out hazy and slow, barely discernible to anyone but me.

"M-manza but..."

I fired again and again, whittling Craig's health down as he limped away. He yelled something, but I couldn't make sense of the words. That was when I came to a horrible realization.

Craig wasn't alone. He'd said he and his boys had been the ones to wipe out Ben and his allies. And yet I'd been fighting him alone? Where were the rest of his people?

My heart sank, knowing the answer. While I was fighting Craig, they were busy ambushing the rest of the defenders trying to complete the settlement establishment quest. All those people I'd just saved were being slaughtered from behind by the people they thought they were defending.

And my own people were probably faring no better. Sakura, Bridget, Frank, and all the others. What was happening to them right now?

"--Asses back in here!" Craig shouted.

I barely caught the last of his orders.

But the doors to the rear office swung open, and a few haggard groups of Craig's men stomped in, led by those two still in prisoner uniforms from before. I noticed them coming in from the front and the side, the two flanks where I'd helped out. Nobody came in from the rear, the sector guarded by my companions.

I realized then and there that it was now or never. I had to take Craig down now, or I never would. So I rushed him, heedless of my wounds, still busy healing under the effects of Mind Over Flesh. The conversion of health points to vitality wasn't instantaneous and instead was more like enhanced regeneration. It would take some time before I was back at full health, but I didn't have time to wait. So battered, bruised, and half dead, I attacked.

I heard a scream behind me as someone grabbed Margaret and tore her rifle away. I was on my own. Using Power Jump to leap into action, I jumped on top of Craig's back

with my sword landing first. I stuck it into his back, swinging from the grip, with my weapon impaled a hand deep into his body. He stumbled awkwardly, unable to reach for my weapon lodged in the small of his own back.

I pointed my hand at the back of his skull and fired spells for all I was worth.

“Manfa Bult!” I said around cracked lips, a cloudy head, and the chips of still-broken teeth.

“Shoot him! Shoot him!” Craig cried as he turned like a whale with a harpoon in its side.

His goons heeded his call. A hail of bullets flew our way. I felt them pelt my back from head to toe. Deflect only blocked the first of them, with the rest of them striking home.

Craig was bigger than me, so even with my body between him and the rain of bullets, he still got struck a dozen times. But like with Margaret’s bullets, these didn’t pierce his skin. It was like he was getting hit with paintballs instead of real bullets.

But the bullets pierced into me. I felt them, even as I tried to take Craig down with sword and spell.

“Argh!” Craig cried as the tip of my sword dug into his throat, sending out another gush of blood. His voice came out wet and sticky as the blood drained from his throat. One of his eyes was swollen shut after one of my Mana Bolts struck it.

But Craig finally figured out why his gun wasn’t working, and switched hands. He swapped his pistol over to his other hand, reached between his own legs, and fired up

into my stomach. Somehow, the bullet he shot from that little gun seemed twice as loud as the guns shooting me in the back, and three times as painful.

I tried to keep fighting, anyway. I had Iron Will, so I leaned on that skill to grant me the strength to stand. But it was no use. Craig's last bullet struck my spine, and try as I might, I couldn't get my legs to respond.

When Craig finally threw me off his back, I landed on the ground like a wet rag. I crumpled and simply lay there in an awkward pile, rallying the last of my energy to fire one more Mana Bolt.

I heard a dozen footsteps rushing toward Craig, running to his aid.

"Boss! That bastard really did a number on you, huh?"

"Shut up and heal me," Craig growled.

I struggled to fire a Mana Bolt again, but something was wrong. My vision blurred, and my body refused to respond.

Craig cast me one last hateful glance down at me, though this time it was tinged with a victorious grin. "He was a damn tough bastard. I'll give him that."

I tried to tell him that we weren't done yet, but I couldn't move. I couldn't activate Mana Bolt. I couldn't do anything.

My entire body felt numb. Even the anger and fear I'd felt during the fight was fading. I was tired, so very, very tired. Drifting off sounded like a good idea—and at the moment, I felt perfectly at peace.

You have died!

Would you like to view your achievements?

Craig's forces were herding the defenders from outside through the door and into the office, where all the other bodies lay on the ground. Craig must have activated a skill, because his back straightened as some of his wounds eased. He seemed to recover Vitality at a tremendous pace, just like Mind over Flesh. He strode back into the office, forcing himself to walk properly, despite the bruises from Margaret's bullets and no doubt a heavy pounding in his skull.

"Fuck, I had a big speech planned, but I can't remember the damn thing," Craig chuckled darkly, no doubt due to his many concussions. "Anyway, your plan to kill me failed, cocksuckers. I'm in charge, and anyone who doesn't like it gets to join Carter, Ben, and all their backstabbing friends. Understood?"

"Y-you... you killed them! You killed them all?!" A nervous looking man said. "I refuse to follow a murderer! We're not savages. We need to have a trial, and you'll be the first person--"

Bang!

Craig shot him in the head. "Next! Who else has a complaint?"

Everyone went quiet after that.

The people coming in from the back entrance were the worst for wear. Sakura, Frank, Bridget, and Marcus looked like they'd put up a tough fight, even surprised from behind as they must have been. But Craig had men to spare. They must have gotten reinforcements at some point, because there were twice as many of Craig's goons behind them than there were behind either of the other flanks.

Bridget's gaze traced a line across the floor, first to Margaret, bloody and sobbing on the ground with a rough-looking man pinning her to the floor with a foot on her back. Then her eyes darted to Ben. He lay sprawled backward in death on a pile of the corpses of the people he'd hoped to secure this shelter for.

Then her eyes went to me, laying in an unmoving heap.

"Carter..." Bridget gasped.

Frank's eyes fixed on me as well before he shook his head and sighed.

Sakura was the one I was most worried about. Given her disposition, there was a good chance she'd spring at Craig, then and there. But I was a higher level than she was, and I hadn't been able to beat him one-on-one. Those extra stats from being over level ten and having a class were just too much to overcome—no matter how much anger or force of will you had to throw at them. I was proof of that.

If Sakura tried something, she'd only get herself killed.

I winced as she opened her mouth, afraid she was about to do something that would get her killed. I could see panic, fear, and rage in her eyes, unlike anything I'd ever seen from her before. Her pupils were wide like a cats, and I sensed her heartbeat racing so fast it sounded more like an engine than an organ. Her nails dug into her palm so hard they drew blood.

I saw a promise in her eyes, then. She would find a way to kill Craig where I'd failed and avenge my death. I was pleasantly surprised Sakura wasn't going to get herself killed in my name, though I feared she'd probably do something stupid sooner or later.

Still, women seemed to be a bit of a blind spot for Craig; he might not see a surprise attack from Sakura coming. Then again, it wasn't like Sakura would be positioned to gain levels as the survival group's sewage specialist. I just hoped that Sakura would be able to find her own path. It felt painful to say it, but it was something I'd have to get used to, now that I was dead.

"I'm touched, first Margaret, and now you, Sakura." Craig chuckled as he saw the dark look on Sakura's face. "To be honest, neither of you are my type, but a loyal woman is worth admiring. Maybe I'll only have you shovel shit a few times a week instead of for the rest of your life. Hell, maybe I'll even let you be Bridget's maid when she finally wakes up and realizes her proper place."

"That's never going to happen, Craig. Not before, and definitely not now," Bridget spat.

Time seemed to slow as I tried to follow the conversation, but the words were getting blurrier. I realized I wasn't even looking through my own eyes anymore. Those were sightless, glassy and distant as my body lay there on the ground. I tried to walk back toward my body, but my point of view wouldn't move.

That was when I realized I was just looking at another System screen. I was being

shown a video of what was happening after my death. My part in things had already come to a close. I didn't like that thought. In fact, it made me mad.

The words flashed across my System menu once more, as though they were mocking me.

You have died.

Would you like to view your achievements?

The anger I felt was a dull, hollow thing. Without the glandular reactions of life, I couldn't be furious in the way that I used to be, and for some reason that just made me even angrier. I'd been killed by Craig, of all people. I'd been overwhelmed by the superior levels of an inferior opponent.

I thought of all the things I hadn't been able to do. I still had Myrina's token. I'd never used it to see her again. The farmhouse I'd been living out of on the outskirts of Crownhill was full of supplies that I'd accumulated to survive an apocalypse just like this one. To think, the day had finally come while I was still at work. All those supplies, so carefully stashed away, would be nothing more than food for wild animals.

I hadn't gotten to spend more time with Sakura, either. What would she do now? And Bridget, too. She'd been counting on me as well. What about Frank, Marcus, and all the other civilians who'd been looking up to me? What was going to happen to them?

I didn't want to know the answer, and before I could think of anything else, a voice from behind me spoke.

“Oooh, you have some rather nice scores, considering how early we are in the integration. Look at that, top one million! For a planet as big as yours, that’s really incredible,” the voice said.

Her words were bubbly and excitable, exactly the opposite of how I felt. I tried to turn my head, but found I had no neck to turn.

Fortunately, the voice came to my rescue. “Oh, you can’t see. I get it. Since you’re a newly integrated soul, the System doesn’t have any previous incarnation memories to return to you. I guess I’ve got to walk you through forming a soul body. Try focusing on my voice. Remember how you used to hear things when you were alive…”

The voice walked me through several more steps of visualizing myself and, before long, I could move. I realized my face was stuck to something like it was glued there, and I pulled at it. It took a tremendous burst of strength to yank myself free, but when I finally got it off, I felt like I was holding something a lot like a really advanced VR headset.

I blinked and realized I was sitting in a pod. That was weird. For a moment, I had some hope that all that I’d just experienced had been some horrible, twisted video game. Maybe aliens had arrived and shoved all of humanity into VR pods to create the system apocalypse, and only now was I breaking free.

But those hopes died as soon as I saw my hands. They weren’t the hands I remembered. They were hazy blue outlines of hands, barely there—I was practically transparent. In other words, I was a ghost.

“Look! You might miss it! Other humans are still climbing in rank, so your high score is dropping. Look now while it’s still super high!” the cheery voice who’d just walked me through transforming into a ghost said.

I turned towards the voice and saw a young woman. Her hair was jet black, contrasting sharply with skin that was as pale as paper. She wore a long flowing dress made of darkness so deep it might as well be a bundle of shadows. In her hand, she gestured with something that looked suspiciously like a scythe.

I followed where she was, pointing at the screen just above the VR headset my face had been glued to. Or, more accurately, the thing my face had manifested on. I was sitting in a puddle of stagnant water about an inch deep. Both it and me were contained within a large bathtub.

Achievements!

247 Monsters slain!

Highest Level: 9 (999 experience points)

“Oh dear, a single experience point away from level 10,” the young woman shook her head sadly.

“If you’d stayed and killed just one more cockroach, you would have hit level 10 and gotten a class. You might not have died if you’d managed that. I always thought it was such a shame that the System didn’t show experience bars, but I understand why. Having them gets people min-maxing, and if they’re not getting enough experience points, they just stop fighting and look elsewhere for ways to get ahead. That’s not what the System is supposed to be about.”

“Damn. I really got screwed,” I said.

“Sure did. Now let’s look at your romance scores!”

Romance Achievements:

2 Women seduced

0 Sexual partners

“Zero partners? But you’re so handsome! Oh, right... you’re from a newly integrated world. It wouldn’t have counted anything before today. In that case, two women seduced is pretty good!” The young woman continued. She started flipping through the rest of my achievements, one after another.

“What’s happening?” I asked. “Where am I, and who are you?”

“Right, new soul. Sorry. I got carried away looking at your achievements. This is the afterlife!”

She paused, waiting for some kind of a reaction, I guess. I just stared at her blankly.

“Well, what the System decided the afterlife should be. Supposedly there used to be another one, but then the System came, and we all end up here now,” the young woman replied. “As for me? I’m your reaper!”

“My... reaper?”

“For your whole shard, which is the fraction of your planet that you’re on. I’m a new reaper, but I’m working my way up the ranks! I’m racking up System Points! By the time I reincarnate, I’m going to have enough to get my soul in the body of a supreme

powerhouse's beloved daughter! I'll be able to spend the rest of eternity living the easy life..."

The reaper sighed, smiling in wistful imagination.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

"Sure did! I had lots of different names over all my lifetimes. Once, I was a big plump fish, and someone called me Dinner!" She frowned. "Though I didn't last much longer after that. Another time, I was a tree, and people called me Scrapwood! Most recently, I lived my longest life yet, where I was an Elf named slave number M6777!"

"None of those sound like names..." I replied. It sounded like her last life had been particularly tragic.

The young woman — no, the elf — shrugged. Now that I was looking, I could see she had slightly pointed ears, just like storybook elves. And she had the delicate features to match.

"I think when I was a child, my mother wanted me to be named Lyra. Before the whole slave thing, obviously." She shrugged. "Not much use for names like those in the mines."

Her face turned grim for a moment before she forced the expression away and returned to a demeanor of good cheer. "But I'm super jealous of your high score! My achievements were basically zero across the board in every one of my lifetimes! Especially the romance one! I wish I could be part of a newly integrated world. There's so much more opportunity there compared to the rest of the multiverse."

She scuffed a dainty slippered foot across the shag... was that carpet?

"It's that first step that's really tough. If you can't muster the levels to hunt down your first enemies, you hardly ever progress..." Lyra shrugged her shoulders sadly. "At least, I haven't figured out how to do it..."

"It sounds like you've had a rough time," I said. "How about this? If I tell you what I did to get those achievements, how about you tell me a little bit about what you know?"

"Okay!" Lyra replied.

When I thought of someone extremely knowledgeable, I tended to think of ancient sages with white beards so long they reached the floor beneath them—not cute elf reapers with a painted-on smile. But Lyra was as knowledgeable as they came, and she answered everything I asked of her.

I wasn't in the same spatial dimension I was before. If the world was a flat plane, I'd traveled one step above it. This realm stretched every bit as wide as the real world did, but things were different here. This dimension was the realm of the System. The pain I'd felt upon integration was probably the System tearing my soul out of whatever dimension it occupied before and pulling it into this... thing that I now found myself in.

"You're newly integrated, and that's because the System only just grew to reach the space your world once occupied. All this around you is the System!" Lyra explained, twirling with her arms out, which caused her shadowy dress to flare, revealing delightfully shaped calves.

I looked around us. It looked like we were in a run-down old arcade from the late twentieth century, complete with the smell of smoke and grease-stained seats beneath me. The bathtub I'd been sitting in looked like it was in front of one of those old race car games, and the screen above me still displayed my romantic exploits broken down in achievement form.

"This is the System?" I asked skeptically.

"The System is efficient," Lyra explained. "It takes whatever it finds in the ordinary world and repurposes it to build itself anew. Everything eventually gets standardized... but not until your world starts leveling enough to make it worthwhile. At that point, there won't be much for me to do, but for now, there are all sorts of weird bugs you get during new integrations! For example, I've already had three people come back to life on me!"

My non-corporeal ears perked up at that. "Come back to life?"

"Yup! Normally, nearly dying before level 10 unlocks a potential racial switch to undead, if your local shard has that race unlocked. Your planet didn't already have any undead races, but this early in the integration, there's always someone right at zero hit points and moments away from dying!" she explained, her words pouring out in a rush.

"Turns out, with your local version of the System that fits the requirements of the undead! As a result, some of the dead people have been able to select a bunch of undead races like liches, revenants, skeletons, and the like. Since undead don't have hit points the same way living people do, switching races pretty much restores dead people to full health, so all of a sudden, you get dead people popping back up after they're supposed to be gone!" She stomped her foot. "It's a real problem, and I hope it's fixed soon."

I felt anticipation burning in my soul. "So... would it be possible for me to become an

undead?”

To be honest, I wasn't enjoying being dead all that much, but if it meant a second chance...

“No, sorry. The trick only works for those choosing their class at level 10. That's when a race swap becomes available. Though some people have affinities for different races that might make themselves known a little earlier. Sadly, you're not one of them. So, no cheating death by becoming a lich for you!” Lyra replied.

“There has to be a way. I was only one experience point away from level ten, remember?”

“Nope!” Lyra shook her head, her dark hair flinging back and forth. “No asking me for cheats! That's... well... cheating!”

My heart sank. There went my ticket back to the real world.

“What about this thing in my hands? How does it work?” I asked as I held up the VR controller my soul had been attached to.

“The System needs symbolism more than anything, really. It works in a realm of concepts and abstraction that extends far beyond this place. Though, trust me, things get way more confusing if you dig any deeper into its mechanisms than this. Basically, the controller symbolizes the System's ability to overlay information over how you experience the world.”

She pointed to the bathtub. “The pod you were laying in is how it grafts little bits of power onto your soul, like titles and new stat points. Honestly, I’m still making sense of it all, but I was told it should be perfectly logical to you earthlings!”

Lyra gestured to the tank around me, pointing at each of the features. “The stuff you were sitting in? That’s not water. That’s stat points provided by the system! It’s a lot easier than trying to grow your soul the old-fashioned way. Think of it like the perfect blend of soul-food, provided by the System to make souls grow bigger and stronger!” Her smile lit up the room.

And here I thought reapers were supposed to be dark, dour, and... well, scary.

“You lose some when you die,” she explained, “but not all of them. Really, your soul is the only thing you keep with you between lives, so every bit of improvement is worthwhile! If you’d lived a little longer, it all would have been absorbed into your soul for real and become a part of you. But since you didn’t have the time to fully acclimatize to the power, it’s just gathered around you like this. I recommend staying right where you are until you’re done. Those stat points are going to be hard to get in your next life!”

I looked at the nozzle. A tiny trickle of fluid was still dripping out of the nozzle. It looked like it was just a knob. What if I turned it on all the way? Would enough stat points to fill my bathtub appear? I reached for the knob.

Lyra’s eyes widened when she saw what I was doing. “Nooo!” she yelled, trying to grab my hand.

But I was faster. I turned the knob, and... a tiny rust-tinted trickle dripped out. Maybe a cup full of stat points, but no more.

“Whew. I really thought you’d found a cheat there!” Lyra wiped her brow. “Looks like the system is controlling the disbursement of stat points from higher up the food chain than us.”

“What would have happened if I had gotten more stat points?” I asked.

“Well, not much if you just got another point in Strength. But if you got another point in Vitality? The System would have to figure out if you were really dead or not. And judging by the state of your body?” She grimaced. “Yeah, probably still dead.”

“But what if that knob had worked and I got some stat points of vitality?” I asked.

“Maybe if you’d gotten a couple dozen points of Vitality. Your body would instantly heal, and you’d be alive again. This pod here would vanish, since you wouldn’t be on this plane of existence anymore. You’d be back in the real world and I wouldn’t be able to stop you. Heck, not even the System could destroy you directly. It would have to afflict you with some curse and send monsters to kill you, to fix the problem.”

“You’re sure you can’t just give me a hint about a bug you’ve found?” I teased.

“No way! I’m an honest, upstanding reaper.”

“What if I offered to take you with me?”

Lyra froze a moment. “T-that... uh... well, there’s no point in considering that, since it’s way out of your reach. There’s no body there for me, and the ability to make a body from scratch takes either tremendous magical knowledge and a high leveled class, or a

man and a woman who love each other and nine months of time. It depends on what method you're going for."

"Damn. Well, what about a voucher? Redeemable for one body when I get around to making one?" It felt weird to be literally offering my firstborn to a stranger I'd met only minutes ago, but something about the reaper just made me want to help her. I probably would have tried to help her out, even if I wasn't desperately pleading with her to help me get my life back.

Lyra put her hands on her hips. "What do you even want to come back to life again for, anyway? There's tons of stuff to do here in Purgatory!"

My eyes turned back to the screen. "I've got promises to keep and people I want to see again."

Lyra's expression softened. "That sounds... romantic. I wish I could help you; I really do. But I can't, even for a bribe."

"I understand..." I sighed and lay back in my bathwater, watching my achievements flicker by again. I looked at my VR headset and wondered if I'd still be able to peek in on what was happening around my body. I wondered if that was something I even wanted to see.

I wondered if Ben had been watching my fight with Craig and rooting for me. Heck, there had been close to a hundred bodies there. Surely, at least a few of them stayed to watch. I was pretty sure I'd looked pretty badass, except for there at the end.

Somehow, the fact that I'd had an audience made me feel a bit better about my loss. That was when I came to a sudden realization. This is where Ben and all the others

should have ended up when they died... meaning I could see them again if only I knew where to look.

“Hey, Lyra?” I asked.

She turned to look at me, pulling her gaze up from her scythe.

Looking at it now, I realized the blade was actually a projection device, and it created a screen along the entire length of the scythe’s blade—like a tablet made of a hologram. “This isn’t another attempt at a bribe, is it?”

“I was wondering where some of my friends are. A lot of people I know died recently, and I wanted to know if I could see them again,” I asked.

Lyra shrugged. “Yeah, they should be around here somewhere. But you should wait until you’ve absorbed all your stat points into your soul. Otherwise, anyone could just come along and take them!”

I stood up. “Nah. I’ll come back to them later. I just had a thought.”

Most of the places where bathtubs and VR headsets should have sat were empty. These spots represented newly-formed tethers between humans on Earth and the System. Its arrival had replaced whatever had filled this dimension previously, or at least intercepted our souls on the way between here and there. Had the System placed our real afterlives out of reach forever?

That was a scary thought.

Another scary thought was the idea that someone in this Dimension could just hack at the System controls here and disconnect someone in the world below. I asked Lyra as much, and was surprised when she said it had happened before. System blackouts were rare, but not the end of the world. Most people gained stats slowly enough that their souls completely absorbed them, most wouldn't even notice a change until they tried to access their stat menu.

For the people of Earth, though, that would be a much bigger problem. That's why Lyra was here, to make sure everything was running smoothly. As some tiny town in the middle of nowhere with a modest population, we weren't a particularly important station for her, but she took her job seriously.

She was interested in Earth culture before the integration—movies, in particular, were quite interesting to her. I talked to her for quite a while before her duties finally came up again and she had to go.

Lyra was pleasant company and our conversation had been easy, but I was pretty sure she'd try to stop me if she knew what I was planning to do. The last thing she did before leaving to see to her duties, was to point out where Ben was.

This run-down old arcade was far bigger than it should have been, much like the buildings on Earth. It actually blended together with an office complex that looked suspiciously like the one I'd been working out of for the past few years.

Had there been an arcade near our work? I wasn't sure. Lyra said the exact location in this dimension shifted and changed all the time, but something still felt familiar about my surroundings—twisted by the System, as they were.

Where was Sakura in this mess? Or Bridget? Or Frank? Maybe I could give them some sort of boost from the other side. They might never know the angel on their shoulders was me, walking the halls of this strange otherworldly plane, but here I was. But since I had no way of figuring that out, I would just have to help them the hard way. In other words, by finding my way back to them.

Eventually, I found Ben. It was hard to tell it was him. He'd been a broad-shouldered man with a clean-cut suit and a sharp look in his eyes, at least when he'd been alive. That had been his defining feature. But he wasn't really himself anymore—just as I wasn't really myself, either. The two of us were hollow spirits, more translucent than alive. In fact, the only person here who resembled a living being was the reaper, Lyra.

Presumably, that form came with power and time spent absorbing all those stat points, but neither of us was at that level yet.

“Ben?” I called to the hazy outline of a figure sitting in a bathtub. He looked more like a faceless blob, roughly in the shape of a man, than a person. His hands were more like mittens, and his arms and legs were just tubes of energy. He was even less distinct than I was.

But he recognized me. His voice came to me like a chilly whisper that gradually grew clearer, kind of like I thought a ghost might sound.

“Carter... you... died...”

“Yeah, I did.”

“I'm... sorry...”

“It’s not your fault, Ben. Craig and I would have come to blows, eventually. I guess the smart thing to do would have been to pack our things and run, but who could have guessed Craig would recruit so many goons?” I shook my head.

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. We sat in shared silence for a moment, remembering the lives we’d lost.

“Have you spoken with the reaper?” I asked. “Lyra?”

Ben nodded.

“She mentioned that some people have been coming back to life through certain tricks. This whole system dimension isn’t quite built as well as it’s supposed to be. There are vulnerabilities to exploit... possibilities, potentials, and tricks.”

“You... want to go back...” Ben said.

I nodded. “More than anything.”

Ben’s chest heaved. He looked up to meet my eyes. “How... can I help?”

I smiled. “I was hoping you’d ask that question.”

I helped Ben fix up his body a little so he could walk around with me. Together, we found all the others who'd died at Craig's hands. Some had already passed on, souls harvested by the System to be placed elsewhere. Maybe they'd be given another shot at life, or maybe they'd have to live a few lives in the bodies of monsters. Lyra's brief explanation about how things worked wasn't enough to say for sure.

But enough remained for my plans to have a shot. If I wanted to restore myself to life, I'd need all the help they could give me. I started by helping them form their bodies well enough to speak. Apparently, Ben and I had been the only ones interesting enough for Lyra to come by and check out our achievements. The others hadn't seen her, and were still nothing more than blobs of soul stuck to VR consoles.

I told them what she'd told me. We were dead, and this was Purgatory. If we were headed to a real afterlife before, the System had other plans for our souls. I wasn't sure what those plans were, yet, but apparently there were ways to make the System give you more beneficial reincarnations than before. It all felt a bit like some kind of techno-Buddhist reincarnation up to that point, but that was where things diverged.

Getting a better reincarnation in your next life didn't seem to have much to do with being a good person. It was more about getting high achievements. For those who couldn't do that, they could work for the System for a while—like Lyra did—to win its favor by maintaining the place and keeping things running smoothly. Though being able to do that required being able to form a proper body. Most of those we gathered and spoke to planned to choose that option, including Ben.

“So... you want to... steal our bathwater?” A ghost of a young woman asked. I was pretty sure I'd seen her body lying in a pile back in the real world.

“Don't put it like that!” I protested. “And it isn't bathwater... not exactly. Ben, back me up here!”

“It admittedly does look like bathwater,” Ben said unhelpfully. He was speaking much more normally now that he’d had a bit of practice and had worked on his body a bit more.

“Look, all I need is a couple of stat points from each of you. That should be enough for me to come back to life. From there, all I need to do is kill something, and I’ll level up and get a class. Then I’ll be back in action,” I explained.

“But you’ll... avenge us?” the ghost of the young woman asked. “Kill... Craig?”

“I promise.”

“Cut... off his dick... choke him to death with it...” the ghost of the young woman hissed.

“Uh... maybe not that part.”

What followed was a great deal of arguing. How much was the stat point bathwater worth? Should they give it to me? In life, many of these people had regarded me as something of a hero for bringing them back food in their time of need. My reputation was actually surprisingly good amongst everyone here—not that it had done me much good there at the end, with all of them dead.

With Ben’s help and the fact that I shared the trick of turning the knob on each tub for a little trickle of extra power, I eventually convinced everyone to give me a cupful of what they had. In exchange, I made a few promises.

"I swear I'll avenge all of you," I promised.

"And check in on Margaret." Ben made me promise. "Tell her I'm dead, but not gone. I'll be looking for a way to help her out from this side. Maybe even join her again, if I find a good body to snatch." He grimaced. "Though I hope she understands that I don't want to be a giant rat just to reunite with her a little sooner. Maybe a fox monster, though. She was really into that one time I got this costume, and I--"

I held up a hand. "I think you can handle that decision on your own. Good luck, Ben."

"And you, Carter." Ben shook my hand, which was a little awkward with our malformed spirit appendages, but it also felt a lot more sincere than a handshake in our old bodies would have been.

"I'll try to keep Crownhill a nice place to come back to for all of you when you're able to. That and killing Craig are the only two promises I'll make—oh... and telling Margaret—but I'll try and look after your loved ones as best I can."

We scavenged a few cups to collect the stat point water. Most of the people were too weak to carry theirs over to my tub, but Ben and I managed it. Even though everyone had only given me a cup full, my tub was nearly full by the time I sank back into it.

"We're going to want to make ourselves scarce," Ben said. "Back to your tubs, everyone. If that Reaper girl comes by again, I'll distract her for you, Carter."

"Thanks. I don't know if she could stop what I'm trying to do, but she'll probably try."

Ben shrugged. "I don't know. She seems like a softie at heart. Maybe she's made herself scarce on purpose."

"Once I'm alive again, I should be beyond her reach, either way," I replied. "Thank you, everyone. I won't forget this favor, and I hope we all meet again!"

Ben and the others waved me goodbye as I placed the helmet back on my face. At first, I saw the same message I'd seen when I was killed.

You have died!

View your achievements?

But then that abruptly shifted.

Error. Recalculating...

Health points above zero. Life signs detected. Re-calibrating soul...

The first thing I felt was a wave of agony. The pain was extreme—to the point that it rivaled the excruciating agony of the integration. Only this pain was a purely physical sensation. My mind was fine, but my body existed in a state of pure agony.

I reminded myself that pain was good. It meant that I had a body—which was more than I'd had just a moment ago. Now that I'd spent some time being in just my soul, I could feel it as a distinct thing instead of the formless mass it had been before. The feeling of

the Purgatory Dimension was already slipping out of my grasp, and the explicit details of the place were fading.

Perhaps a physical mind simply couldn't hold on to memories formed in that place, or maybe I just needed a higher Intelligence stat. But I didn't want to forget my promises, so I used them like a mantra to fight off the pain.

Kill Craig. Avenge the fallen. Talk to Margaret. Make this a better place for when they return...

I repeated those words to myself over and over, as the pain continued to build. I was stiff, cold, and unmoving, but eventually, control over my body returned to me.

And what a body it was. I'd forgotten just how hard I'd been hit during that fight with Craig. How long had it been since all that had happened?

I had several missed notifications.

You have accepted a new quest!

Vengeance of the Fallen - The souls of the slain cry out for revenge against the one who wronged them. They have given you their aid and demand you slay Craig on their behalf.

Objectives: Kill Craig

Penalties: Failure to complete this quest will mark you as an oath breaker, and reduce your reputation during all encounters with fellow humans, both living and dead.

Well, I'd given my word that I was going to kill Craig for Ben and everyone else. I planned to keep my promises, too. If the System wanted to remind me that I'd made that promise, it was welcome to do so.

Blessed of the System has awarded you one new stat point in each attribute!

Your Regeneration Proficiency has increased to 4!

You have gained 1 point in Strength!

You have gained 1 points in Agility!

You have gained 3 points in Perception

You have gained 4 points in Vitality

You have gained 6 points in Intelligence

You have gained 4 points in Willpower

You have gained 5 points in Charisma (Hidden Stat)

You have gained 5 points in Luck (Hidden Stat)

It looked like the gifts I'd gotten from the others in the Purgatory dimension had given me somewhere between one and five points in every stat. That was thirty-three stat points! In other words, more than eight levels worth of stats, including the boost in stats from my Blessed of the System title!

A chime went off, and a quest I'd nearly forgotten about suddenly appeared.

Quest Completed!

You have completed the Stat Quest: Charisma Unleashed.

Less than ten percent of users unlock the Charisma stat; for most it remains an inaccessible hidden stat. Charisma is a path to many abilities both useful and frightening.

You may now dedicate stat points to your charisma stat as though it were a normal stat. You may now accept classes and abilities that scale off charisma.

The charisma stats alone had been a major boon, allowing me to complete the quest I'd gotten almost as soon as the integration began. I also saw a new stat: Luck. Perhaps I'd

get a quest to unlock that hidden stat, much like I'd unlocked Charisma.

But that was for later. For now, I had many other notifications to go through. Completing my Charisma Unleashed quest was just the start. I had more notifications to read.

New Stat Quest Available: Luck Unleashed

Like Charisma, Luck is a special stat only the fortunate may freely access at will. Complete this stat quest to gain access to the luck stat!

Objectives: Raise Luck to 20 within one day.

Rewards: Unlocking the Luck stat will provide unique skills and abilities otherwise inaccessible.

This quest seemed exponentially harder than Charisma Unleashed. But on the other hand, the five luck I'd gotten in Purgatory meant I was already well on my way to unlocking it. It would also give me access to one more source of skill books. I accepted the quest.

With the new stats, my power had surged by a tremendous degree. I remembered how painful a few points in any one stat were. Maybe some of this pain came from those stats and would vanish shortly?

I could hope, but I had my doubts. The more I surveyed the damage to my body, the

worse off I felt. Healing this was going to take a lot of work.

Besides the boost in stats, I actually had a new title.

Death Defier (Legendary) - You have foiled death and returned to the world of the living after breathing your last breath! Far harder than being healed from the brink, your soul has seen the other side and returned.

20% Bonus to Willpower, Intelligence, and Charisma.

All soul attacks have reduced effectiveness against you, and you have a greater affinity for soul magic.

The new title sounded amazing. Flat percentage bonuses with no strings attached seemed too good to be true. The only thing that convinced me it wasn't a trick, was the fact that I'd literally had to die to get this title. Between that and the fact that the System considered it something worth being called Legendary, it had to be an impressive skill.

But what drew my eye was the title immediately following it.

Soul Vampire (Legendary) - You have hacked the System and convinced other users to willingly give you their stat points. Under the right circumstances, you may be able to convince them to do the same here in the mortal world.

Grants the ability to accept stat points from willing allies.

The title claimed I now could accept stat points from others. I turned to the corpses around me and tried to think about the ability. Nothing happened, not even a System notification telling me that I'd failed to activate it. Perhaps a cold corpse didn't meet the requirements I needed.

I would have kept exploring that new title, if it hadn't been for the third legendary title waiting for me. I started to get excited, but as I read, my heart became wrapped in a vice of ice. This last title was no boon. It was a curse.

Death Curse (Unique) - You are someone who should have died and yet cheated death. The System does not tolerate cheating and will seek to reclaim the life it is owed. You have been branded with a Death Curse. Until it is removed, strife will follow you wherever you go.

Monsters will be drawn to your presence and will be more inclined to kill you. The System will give you no rewards for killing them, and while under this curse monsters will not grant you any experience points upon death.

Beware, your Death Curse will bring strife to all those around you. Those you associate with shall find themselves beset by the monsters that seek your life.

Lyra had warned me that something like this might happen. Now, I was cursed, and cursed badly. I would be hunted by monsters and the System itself would actively tilt the odds against me.

Being hunted by monsters might not be the worst thing, if it meant I was constantly gaining levels. Except the Death Curse also removed my ability to gain experience points from killing monsters. I'd constantly have to fight monsters who I wouldn't benefit from killing.

That was bad. Very bad, considering part of my plan to deal with Craig had been to kill something, gain a class, and then fight him on equal footing. But it felt like I'd been stumped before I even began. How was I supposed to get my next level if killing monsters wouldn't give me experience points?

The only saving grace was the fact that it looked like the Death Curse could be cured... eventually. But what would I do until then? I would have to figure something out. That was the only answer I could come up with. I tabled those dire thoughts for later and focused on dealing with my current situation.

My stats were all horribly low, but my health points were the lowest. I still had a bunch of bullets in me, and it seems they were afflicting me with lead poisoning. It wasn't as bad as a Toxic Bite, but at this rate, but I could still eventually die from it.

Fortunately, I had been prepared for this. I had mana to spare, and I immediately activated Mind Over Flesh to convert those mana points into health points. I'd have to keep that running constantly for the next few minutes.

Once that was done, I started going through my to-do list for coming back from the dead.

Arms and legs? Check.

Head still attached? Check.

Health points slowly going up? Check.

Any sounds of activity? Yes, but distant.

Where am I? Somewhere hard, metallic, and cold.

Wherever I was, it smelled like a combination of trash and blood. I was probably surrounded by the rest of the bodies, but the stuff underneath me... wait a minute. I knew that smell. If it hadn't been complete agony to sigh, I would have done so. Craig and his goons had thrown me in the dumpster.

I was in an extremely awkward position. Whoever had dumped me in here hadn't been all that keen on laying us to rest properly. I was bent over backward on myself, with both legs and one arm pinned behind me. I wasn't particularly flexible, and even after all those points in Agility I was no gymnast. If the rest of me wasn't already in agonizing pain, the position really would have hurt.

I struggled to right myself, though doing so aggravated a lot of my wounds and took chunks out of my health point pool. I had to take things slowly and carefully. Craig was certain I was dead, and I planned to keep things that way until I was ready to fulfill my promises. And this time, I wouldn't confront him until my stats were better than his.

That was a mistake I didn't plan to ever make again. But I could afford to be patient. My friends would have shown up in Purgatory if they'd died—but they hadn't, so they weren't dead yet. The danger for them had already passed, since Craig would have killed them already if he was going to kill them at all.

That meant time was on my side. All I had to do was bide my time here until I was fully healed, and then I could--

One of the corpses sitting on top of me groaned. And not in a way that indicated they were still alive.

Zombie - Level 4

Ah, crap. Well, as long as I killed the thing before it started moving enough to attack me, I'd be alright.

You are in the presence of Undead Miasma! You have been afflicted with [Mark of the Undead]. If your health points reach zero, you will transform into a zombie.

Oh, come on

I had a few skill book notifications to go through, but with my life on the line I needed to get out of this dumpster full of corpses before I spent more time catching up on any gains. I rallied the spare mana to cast Mana Bolt and take out one of the zombies awakening above me. Sure enough, the kill didn't push me to level 10.

The curse was real, and it was standing between me and getting a class.

I was all the way up at half health by the time I made my way out of the dumpster. I had to blast a mana bolt through three separate corpses about to turn into zombies before I made it out. If it wasn't for my new strength stat, I don't think I'd have made it out at all. I'd been stuck somewhere around the middle of the pile of bodies, and a normal person would have been completely pinned in place.

I made an unfortunate amount of noise while escaping, and I worried that I'd attracted some attention. When I made my way to the top, I threw one of the mostly-moving corpses out of the dumpster first to draw any fire that might be headed my way. None came.

I'd been thinking the smart thing to do would be to have a guard ready to harvest levels from zombies as they emerged from the dumpster, but it was only the evening of the first day of the integration. People still hadn't gotten used to the idea of undead. And on top of that, Craig would probably need to have the idea pointed out to him before he saw the sense in using a pile of corpses to farm levels.

Still, nobody had ever died from being too cautious, and I waited a few minutes while I regenerated health points, listening for people. There were a few voices, but they were distant and faint.

One unfortunate side effect of being riddled with bullets was the fact that my clothes had been cut to ribbons, and what little of them there was left reeked of death. Someone had even stolen my boots, along with my sword. I debated trying to piece an outfit together off what the corpses were wearing in the dumpster behind me. The thought would have been disturbing just a day ago, but now that I'd seen the souls that once owned those bodies alive and well in another dimension, death wasn't nearly as scary a thing as it used to be.

But ultimately, I decided to let the dead lie. Most of the clothes weren't in my size, and those that were tended to be so crusted with dried blood that they were stiff as sheets. I realized I'd rather walk around naked than wear those things.

I felt a familiar weight settle around my neck. Myrina's token. I thought for certain that someone would have stolen the thing. After all, it was a shiny gold-colored coin. Even if it was too light to be real gold. It looked nicer than my boots, and someone had stolen those.

And yet there the token was, dangling around my neck just like it always had. Cold and alone like I was, it felt warm pressed against my chest. I gave it a kiss for good luck, thankful it was there. It was mine, and I was still me—despite being dead for who knew how long.

The dumpster was across the street from the office building, and I could see the building from where I crouched. The lights were still on from the generator, so Craig must have kept whoever had gotten that thing running.

I heard the distant *pop* of gunfire, accompanied by the sounds of fighting with more primitive methods. The battle was still ongoing, and this time Craig's men alone held the line, supplemented only by what elements of Ben's old fighters he could trust. From the look of things, that wasn't many.

Quest Time Remaining: 2 hours and 5 minutes.

It seems I hadn't been gone that long after all—just long enough to dispose of the bodies. Perhaps time ran slower in the other dimension. I was surprised Craig and his crew had time to do even that much, given the fighting. But after killing Ben and all the others, Craig and his men were probably much higher level than we'd been. Giant Rats and Fire Squirrels weren't all that much of a challenge for Craig's stronger fighters by this point.

There was one thing I did notice that had changed, though. I wasn't sure when it happened, but now a name hovered above the office in my vision.

Miyamoto Office Shelters

The office still bore Sakura's last name, even though she no longer had any connection to the office's leadership. It was Craig's operation now. But the name would serve as a beacon as people looked for the source of the magical floating letters in their vision.

Studying the office from afar, I realized I would have to give Craig at least a little credit. He was using the floodlights to illuminate the area around the shelter, and he had guards stationed at every corner. Monsters were still streaming in two or three at a time. The waves of monsters were more aggressive than they had been—even at their peak when I'd been fighting—but Craig's guards held the line without issue. It only took one man with a gun to protect an entire side of the building.

I used Examine on one of the guards from afar, a rough looking man I'd seen earlier. He was still sporting his prison attire. He hadn't bothered to change out of the orange jumpsuit, even after escaping.

Blaster Bandit (Level 10)

His muzzle flash from the barrel of his gun was far brighter than it should have been. Though he held only a modest-sized handgun, he carved chunks the size of his head out of Fire Squirrels with every shot.

He held his gun at the hip, not even bothering to aim properly, and still hit his targets every time. The move reminded me of Craig—enough so that I was pretty sure they shared at least that skill.

There were similar men at every corner, with each side of the building having at least one level 10 guarding it. I didn't see Craig, but figured he was probably holding himself in reserve in case anyone started getting overwhelmed.

There went my backup plan. Since I hadn't been able to reach level 10 and get a class, my other idea had been to sneak in and grab Sakura and my other companions and make a run for it. We could leave Craig behind and get as far away from Crownhill as we could.

Sure, that would mean breaking my promise to Ben and the others, but I never said when I'd kill Craig, or when I'd make Crownhill safe—just that I'd do it... eventually. The idea didn't sit well with me, though, even if I intended to follow through on my promises someday.

But those guards meant that such a plan had to be pitched out the window. I wasn't going to be able to sneak in there without raising alarms all over the place. I certainly hoped that Craig's goons had lost some people trying to finish the quest, but even if they hadn't I'd still run into Craig. I snorted softly to myself—probably a Craig with even more levels than he'd had when I'd lost to him before. I didn't want to try for a rematch, not quite yet, but soon enough I'd be ready to face him.

I crept away from the office, putting some distance between me and the man who'd already killed me once—even if he was holding Sakura and my friends captive.

The whole problem stemmed from the damn curse. If I didn't have that, I would be able to choose a class and level up out here in the shadows. Craig would most likely be sleeping in preparation for another long day tomorrow, meaning I could spend the whole night getting stronger and attack him just before dawn. That way I'd have hours of experience point farming on him and be well ahead of him in levels once again.

Only I couldn't do any of that, because killing monsters wouldn't give me any experience points. I'd hoped that it was just the zombies, so I shot the first Scavenger Cockroach I saw with a Mana Bolt, hoping that would push me over the edge to level ten. But just like the zombie, it was a dud. The giant rat and the fire squirrel I killed after that did nothing for me either.

Was I completely screwed? Utterly and hopelessly screwed?

My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Fortunately, I didn't have to wander around naked and starving while hunting monsters all night. There were plenty of empty buildings around Crownhill, and I soon found a fast-food restaurant that was mostly empty.

There were a few rats and cockroaches in the restaurant, but some Mana Bolts scared them off quick enough. I actually recognized the place, even after the integration and, after grabbing a bite to eat, I headed next door to an overpriced designer clothing store I'd never actually been inside—though I'd seen it from a distance when taking my lunch break.

I had decided as soon as I stepped out of that dumpster that, while I might be willing to loot some of the clothes off the ground from those people who never came back from the integration, I definitely wasn't putting on anyone's used underwear. Thankfully, I didn't have to.

I found a nice clean set in a bag in the clothing store, along with pants, a long black coat, a belt, and a backpack. I chose all dark colors that would blend into the shadows of the night and assembled a backpack of the best survival equipment I could find. Really, I should have done this hours ago. Now that I was finally out of those stuffy office clothes, I realized just how much they'd been limiting my movements. This was how one should dress in an apocalypse.

Dressed and properly equipped, I killed a few more monsters, once again noting my lack of a new level. How was I supposed to kill Craig without the ability to level? My thoughts turned to my new title, Soul Vampire—maybe I could figure out how that worked?

But how would I convince people to offer up their levels to me?

While muddling through such thoughts, I felt a tingle run up my spine. That was the feeling of someone using Examine on me. Realizing what it was, I became fully alert and twisted my head left and right, trying to find my attacker while simultaneously diving for cover.

And it was a good thing I did, too, because an instant later a bullet slammed into the asphalt where I'd been standing just moments ago. I rolled into a nearby bush, tossing my backpack in the opposite direction to provide a noise to cover my escape.

A half dozen bullets raked across my backpack. Crap! Half the supplies I'd just spent the past thirty minutes gathering were probably ruined now. That annoyed me greatly,

and when I saw the muzzle flash again and had the location of the shooter, I pointed my finger in their direction without hesitation.

I heard a yelp of pain as my Mana Bolt struck home. They were standing on the edge of the roof of a third story building, and my attack must have knocked them off balance enough to send them tumbling out the open window. They fell headfirst to the ground.

If my Mana Bolt hadn't killed them, the fall a moment later had. Their head exploded like a melon, spraying blood and brains everywhere. I waited in silence, listening for anyone else. Nothing. He must have been alone.

I was almost surprised when a notification appeared before my eyes. It was something I had been waiting for, but feared I would never see.

Congratulations! You have reached level 10!

Your race ranking will evolve from 'F' to 'E' rank, granting you additional base stat points for each level and enhancing your existing stats.

Please hold...

A sharp and sudden pain ran throughout my entire body. It was similar to what I'd experienced during the Integration, though not to the same degree. My muscles burned, my bones ached, and my brain felt like it was on fire.

But, moments later, the process was complete. I wasn't sure what had changed, but

new strength flowed through my body that hadn't been there before.

Congratulations! you have reached 'E' rank.

Future race evolutions will come with increasing difficulty.

You have gained +4 Stat points based on your race. Your race points have been allocated according to the stat distribution of the strongest examples of your race.

+1 Strength

+1 Agility

+1 Perception

+1 Vitality.

You will receive three additional automatically assigned points upon selecting a class.

You have four points to manually distribute.

I'd reached level 10, after all. I should have guessed that humans wouldn't be considered monsters. Did that mean any levels I wanted to get would have to be gained by killing other people?

The thought didn't sit well with me. I thought I'd be far more comfortable cutting down ruthless monsters than killing other humans. But it seemed the System's curse might force me to do just that.

I hit 20 in Vitality, giving me another skill selection option. I still wasn't fully healed from coming back from the dead, so this was a welcome treat.

Congratulations on reaching a Vitality milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with a Vitality skill book or upgrade an existing skill.

Choose a Vitality skill book!

- **Book of Second Heart (Common) - Having your heart destroyed will no longer cause critical damage, and blood will continue to pump through your body using a secondary heart structure, positioned according to the user's needs.**
- **Book of Lifesteal (Common) - When inflicting damage, take a tiny portion of that damage back for yourself as health.**
- **Upgrade Mind Over Flesh (Uncommon) ... to Mind Over Flesh (Rare) - Enhances regeneration rate and efficiency of mana to health point conversion.**

Between the three abilities, Lifesteal sounded by far the coolest. However, I was a bit worried about how effective it would be. It was possible that the amount of life I'd gain through such an ability was so minuscule it'd be unnoticeable. Maybe upgrading Mind Over Flesh would be the safer bet?

Nah. I wanted the ability to steal life from my enemies. So that's what I picked. The skill sank into my head with a dull throb, and soon I had another ability. With Death Curse, I had been starting to fear I'd never feel this rush of power ever again. The only problem was that I had to kill my fellow humans to experience it. I put that dark thought out of mind and focused on the new information.

E rank started at level 10. If nothing else, the transition past level 10 brought a tremendous surge in the number of points I got per level. It seemed I'd overestimated my new strength dramatically. All the stats I'd gotten from the others in Purgatory didn't amount to nearly as many levels' worth of points as I thought. That was probably why Craig had put up such a fight against me.

I assigned my new points, pushing my Agility past ten so I could select a new skill.

+1 Agility

+3 Intelligence.

Congratulations on reaching an Agility milestone!

Blessed of the System awards you with an agility skill book!

Choose an Agility skill book!

- **Book of Lunge (Common) - Close the distance with your enemy in a sudden flash of movement.**
- **Book of Bounce (Common) - Redirect the force of impacts against hard**

surfaces to maneuver and reposition.

- **Book of Sure Step (Uncommon) - Your every step is taken with care and deliberation, positioning you just where you need to be to suit your purpose.**

While Lunge might be useful when using my sword, I didn't have my sword and was entirely reliant on Mana Bolt to defend myself with. I wasn't going to take a skill I couldn't use immediately. Likewise, Bounce seemed to be the kind of skill meant for a close-range combatant.

The only real choice was Sure Step. Hopefully, it would help me evade my opponents while keeping my distance from them. With my Agility skill selected, I turned to the rest of my level up notifications.

New Title Earned!

Great Ancestor (Mythic) - You are one of the first ten humans on your shard to reach level 10. Your line is strong, and your progeny will be more likely to be born as healthy young humans.

Your actions will carve future paths for your species. Your descendants' affinities will be molded by your affinities, and their talents will be molded by your talents.

Notice: You have Class choice selections available!

I needed to find someplace safe to go through the rank upgrade and my Class choices,

so I headed into the building that had recently belonged to the shooter I'd just killed. He'd have kept the monsters away, which meant it should be a safer place to stay than anywhere else. Additionally, he probably chose it with defensibility in mind, meaning it was probably one of the best places to hide on the block.

I found his gun next to the dead man's body—a good rifle by the looks of it. Even better than what they'd been selling in the gun store. Scooping up the rifle, I headed inside the building to check it out. I cleared each room to ensure it would be a safe place to hole up for a bit.

Up on the top of the building, I found backpacks full of supplies and gear lining the wall of the stairwell that led onto the roof. Next to the wall, there was a camping stove, several tents, shovels, water purifying tablets, fishing gear, animal traps, and just about anything else you could need—usually in triplicate. In fact, each bag seemed to be a different survival kit, meant to be entirely independent of the others.

I realized what this guy was quickly enough. He'd been one of those predatory survivalist types whose idea of preparing for an apocalypse meant getting free gear by picking off other survivalists from long range with a rifle, then taking their stuff. The blood splattered across most of the bags bore credence to this. Looking at his view of the street, the shooter would have had a perfect angle on anyone leaving Crownhill with all their valuables neatly packed away and ripe for the taking.

With these kinds of supplies, I could coop up in here for a week and survive just fine. But I didn't intend to stay here that long. Still, it would be good to make note of the survival supplies. There was no sense in letting so much good stuff to waste.

I sat down near the far corner of the roof of the building. There had been a cup of coffee brewing on one of the gas-powered camp stoves. It looked like the previous owner of this building had planned a long night picking off fleeing survivors. Since I had a long night planned as well, I helped myself to his coffee, bringing it with me to my corner.

I focused on the thing I'd been waiting for the most. I was about to consider my class, but before I could do that I noticed something warm beneath my shirt. It was getting harder, nearly to the point that it was starting to burn.

I tore my jacket off and dug through my clothes for the hot thing, already having a good idea of what it was. It was Myrina's token.

"Now what?" I muttered aloud

You have met the minimum requirements for preliminary activation of your patronage token!

Your patron is requesting contact. Accept?

Was this Myrina calling me? Or her aunt? In either case, this was a call I'd been waiting for. I just hadn't expected it to come so soon after the integration. I wasn't about to hang up on Myrina, or anyone from the mysterious Amazonian Empire, for that matter—not when there were so many questions I wanted to ask.

I accepted.

A dull tone rang out from the token around my neck. I held it in my hand somewhere between my mouth and ear, not really sure how to use it. Brilliant golden light shot out of the coin, and the token exploded into a cluster of energy. That energy swirled around me and the rest of the room before coalescing into a blob of light sitting across from me.

That blob soon resolved itself into a person. Moments later, as the figure grew clearer, I realized it was a person I recognized. It was Myrina.

"Myrina!" I shouted, smile wide on my face. It was hard to contain my excitement.

I'd often thought about what it'd be like to see her after so long. Would she still think of me the same way she did before? Would she look at me the same way? Would I look at her the same way, now that I knew she was an alien from another planet?

All those questions raced through my mind as Myrina's image took shape, forged entirely of flickering golden light.

"Myrina, I--" I began, struggling to figure out what to say. But I needn't have bothered. Myrina had her greeting all figured out.

She flung herself at me, wrapping her glowing arms around my chest. I didn't expect there to be any force behind her projection, but there was—and Myrina wasn't holding anything back.

She wrapped her arms around me, tackling me to the ground. I might have broken some bones if I'd just been a normal human, but with my extra stat points it just felt like a really aggressive hug.

"Mhmm..." Myrina rubbed her cheek against my chest as she lay on top of me. "Got you again, Carter!"

Myrina was exactly the same. I was starting to wonder why I'd ever worried at all.

20 Myrina was wearing a white cloth dress,

Myrina was wearing a white cloth dress, sort of like a toga. It looked somewhere between what the ancient Greeks wore and gym wear. Her hair was also done up behind her head in an unusual style. I wasn't sure what to call that kind of bun, but it had a certain elegance to it. The only thing unusual about her appearance was the fact that she was wearing eye shadow, which was something I'd never seen on her. In fact, I was pretty sure she didn't usually wear any makeup at all, just her naturally flawless face.

Did she dress up just to see me?

If feeling her presence next to me didn't warm my cold dead heart before, it did now. I almost forgot about my death. And the fact that Craig was still out there... and that all my living friends thought I was dead.

"Aw, not even struggling? I wanted to see how strong you've become after the integration. Integration survivors are supposed to be really tough!" Myrina said as she wriggled on top of where she straddled me, ass pressed to my stomach in such a way that trying to get out from under her was the *last* thing on my mind.

But this was just a hologram, or something like it. As nice as she felt, now that I focused on the feeling, I could tell she wasn't really there. I felt the weight of her on me, but not the warmth. Whatever strange alien magic Myrina was using to create this projection of herself, it only had a bit of tactile sensation to it. I realized I could just push through it and it would part around me like normal light. So that's just what I did. I slid around her projection right through her right arm and hovered over her back with her chest pushed against the ground.

“Ha, now I’ve finally got you.” I grinned.

Could I actually pin the real Myrina with my current stats? She’d been strong back then. Supernaturally strong. But now that the System had arrived, I knew why. She’d had the System back then, and I didn’t. Now that we were on even footing...

Myrina twisted, and the strength in her projection doubled again. She twisted her hips and did *something*. I wasn’t sure what it was, but she executed the move so flawlessly that I knew she must have practiced escaping that exact pin for years.

“Nice try. But you’re going to need a lot more levels before you can pin me,” Myrina purred. Even though she was just a projection made of light, I could feel her warm breath against my neck. I felt my heart beat faster, and not because of the exercise. Myrina wrapped her arms around me.

I chuckled, returning Myrina’s embrace. There was just a tiny bit of tactile sensation to Myrina’s form. She was still definitely made of light, but she was more than just a hologram. It was enough to give the impression of her physical presence, especially when she was hugging me like this.

Still, as she hugged me tighter, her arms phased right through me, and she sighed. “I’m sorry I don’t have better farwalking tablets. These patronage tokens are just for meet and greets, really. I’m supposed to introduce you to the Amazonian Empire and explain why you should let us support you. That kind of thing. I suppose I should get on with it, though. You didn’t activate this token just to see little old me.”

It was my time to silence her. “Myrina, you know I hung onto your token all these years, but not because of the apocalypse you warned me about. I hung onto it because I hoped I’d get to see you again. And now I can.”

Myrina blushed. “I don’t remember you having such a way with words. Have you been dumping all your stats into Charisma?”

I chuckled. “Nope, but a few have wound up there all the same. I can share my System screen with you if you like. I actually have a lot of questions and quite a story to tell. Then you can give me your Amazon Empire sales pitch.”

Myrina smiled. “Tell me as much as you can, though I have to warn you, we’re on a bit of a time limit. The System only allows these initial meet and greets to last for so long.”

I quickly summarized the events since the integration. I couldn't believe that it hadn't even been a full day. Myrina's expression when I told her of my adventures went from excitement, to eagerness, to fear, to terror, and then to amazement.

“You died!” Myrina said. “And then you came back to life? You’re certain you were completely dead? This wasn’t just some strange dream you had while you regenerated?”

“Completely. I saw my dead comrades and everything.”

“Huh. That isn’t supposed to happen. I’m guessing the System is having a harder time interfacing with your world than initially believed. Have you seen any oddities in your surroundings?” Myrina asked.

“Now that you mention it, a lot of our buildings were duplicated without really being copied. There are a bunch of useless chunks of buildings sitting around Crownhill.”

Myrina nodded, expression serious. “Something must have glitched in the System during its initial calibration. It’s designed to integrate medieval civilizations, and your technology probably threw it off. Heavens know it threw our spells off during those first few months among you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much magic that doesn’t use magic before!” She finally let me up off of the ground, and I sat upright against the short wall. Myrina slid over next to me.

I felt a twinge of vicarious pride at that. We had all sorts of wonders before the apocalypse. I might not have had a part in making any of them, but humanity had accomplished a lot—and would do so again, given time. If that Mechanical Master title was anything to go by, humanity had a knack for this sort of thing.

“Well, I’m glad I came back to life, even if I did pick up a curse for my troubles.”

“Curse?” Myrina’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah, a Death Curse.” Rather than try to explain it, I simply opened it up on my System screen and shared my screen with Myrina.

She tapped on her own System screen, presumably transferring the text over. When she did so, her face palled.

“Oh... *that* kind of death curse...”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Myrina bit her lip. “If it was an ordinary curse, I would have been able to send a pill over to cure you instantly—well, as soon as the System allows trade. But System curses are harder, and this one directly debuffs your luck and experience gain. That’s a nasty combination.”

“Give it to me straight, Myrina, am I screwed?”

Myrina sighed. “If we were in other circumstances, I would tell you to hide in a cave until the integration progresses far enough along that I can come to help you in person. But that curse will bring trouble to you no matter where you hide. You’re going to have to find a way to lift it. The only thing I’ll say, is that it’s definitely possible to get rid of it. There are a few rituals back home that could probably do it if done soon enough. I just don’t know how to do it with the resources of a newly integrated world. Still, the System always leaves a path through even the worst scenarios. We’re just not seeing it yet.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to muddle through until I can figure things out.”

Myrina slid closer against me. “Well, that brings us back to the reason I’m here. I want to offer you the support of my faction, the Amazonian Empire! We’re a large faction that spans many worlds, but we’re always trying to establish new relationships, especially on new worlds like yours!”

I rolled my eyes at her over the top sales pitch, but slid one arm around her and gave her image a squeeze.

“With our support,” she continued, “we’ll put you through our tutorial, help you design a good build, and generally provide a guiding hand to keep you at the top of your game! And if you’re able to fulfill certain requirements the System lays out, I’ll eventually even be able to send you care packages, or bring you on a temporary visit to Themyscira!”

“That sounds great. Will you be there?”

Myrina wrapped an arm around my shoulders and leaned against me. “Every step of the way. We're still friends, right? And you still trust me?”

“Yes, Myrina, we're still friends. And after this? I trust you now more than ever.” I chuckled. “If you say it's the right thing to do, then count me in.”

“You're sure? I... I can't offer as much as some of the other factions. Heck, I can't even offer as much as some of the other Amazonian Empire tokens. If my family was willing to sponsor you, I could offer a lot. But... to them their daughter's old friend on a newly integrated planet ranks so far down the list of important things to take care of, that I won't even be able to take resources from the clan vault on your behalf. I can't offer hardly anything from my clan at all. All I can offer is me.”

I squeezed her image again and pressed my lips to her hair. “You're all I need, I promise. Now, if you really want to help me, you could start by helping me pick a class,” I began.

I opened the notification and viewed my class selections, then made the screen visible for Myrina to look at as well.

Myrina straightened now that we were back to serious topics, and she studied the classes on offer with the focus of a professional at work. I had been hoping she'd be able to help me make an informed decision, and it looked like she could do just that. We decided to go through the options on offer one at a time.

First up was Swordsman, which I probably earned due to swinging a sword around during that last fight. But when I could be shooting spells out of my fingertips, did I really want to be stuck waving around a bar of metal? I could do that before the integration just fine.

Swordsman (Common) - A swordsman's blade is an extension of themselves. One with their weapon, they cut through enemies with speed and grace. Among the most versatile of all weapons, the sword is a weapon of tremendous power and history. This class makes use of physical stats and focuses on close combat.

It sounded like it might be immediately useful, at least. I figured it wasn't too tough to figure out how to swing a sword around, so the path of progression seemed pretty straightforward. But would we eventually have to deal with quadratic wizards up against linear swordsmen? That was a common problem in old-world tabletop games. Unless swordsmen had a lot of extremely superhuman abilities, they would fall behind their spell-casting counterparts. I asked Myrina if this was true under the System.

"Not quite. In fact, the Amazonian Empire focuses mostly on physical skills. We have some magic wielders among our ranks, but we mostly rely on our associated factions for that. There are plenty of powerful Amazonian Clans that have attached themselves to some sorcerer king of a distant planet, and that's usually more than enough to meet our magical needs."

She pursed her lips, wrinkling her nose in the cutest way. "There are plenty of paths to the peak, and there are many extraordinarily powerful swordsmen and women—even in just the Amazonian Empire. But it is true that to keep progressing, everyone eventually has to start taking on more magical abilities. My grandmother was an incredible swordswoman. Her blade could even cut through time so she could attack someone in the past. It served her very well in duels. She never lost a fight to first blood."

That sounded downright bizarre. How did wielding a sword turn into cutting through time? But what I'd learned of the System suggested it worked mostly in terms of symbolism and conceptual metaphors more than it did with reality. Maybe a powerful enough swordswoman could use her sword to cut through anything, even things that weren't really there.

I looked at the nearby survival kits. There were a couple of big knives, but nothing I would truly put in the short sword category of my former blade. Taking the swordsman class would be risky enough. Taking the swordsman class when I wasn't even sure I'd be able to get my old sword back? No way.

We looked at the next class.

Arcane Arsenal (Uncommon) - An arcane arsenal is a walking magical armory. They have a projectile for every task and the vast mana reserves to fuel them through a prolonged fight. They are a jack-of-all-elements, but master of none. Their power lies in their ability to switch between attacks of different elemental affinities to use the best tool to slay any foe. This class makes use of mental stats to focus on magical combat.

Arcane Arsenal was an interesting class. Myrina had a lot to say about it, too.

“If you were a woman and could join the Amazonian Empire in full, I would recommend picking the swordsman class. The Empire encourages her citizens to hone their combat capabilities. But men aren't really part of the Amazonian Empire.”

She tilted her head back and forth, face grimacing. “It's tough to explain, and you'll have to come see it for yourself to understand. But basically, most Amazons know the value

in marrying into a little magical support,” Myrina said.

I chuckled and raised my eyebrows. “Oh? Do you know any eligible young Amazons looking for someone with the Arcane Arsenal class?”

Myrina smiled coyly at me, tongue flicking across her lips. “Sure do. Dozens upon dozens of them.”

“Oh? Sounds pretty tempting,” I teased, trying to make Myrina a little jealous. But she shrugged off my best efforts like they were nothing.

Myrina bumped my shoulder and laughed. “It might be a good option, but Arcane Arsenal requires you to have a bunch of front-line fighters to keep anyone from closing with you. I’ve seen wizards of similar classes before. Once you get in close with them, they’re finished.”

Soul Mage (Rare) - A soul mage specializes in magic inherent to a person’s very being, and their unique spells can bypass many traditional defenses. While not as physically imposing as other mage classes, the soul mage can be a terrifying opponent under the right circumstances. This class makes use of mental stats and focuses on unconventional combat. Due to their unpredictable nature and the many sinister evolutions this class makes available, Soul Mages are outlawed on many worlds.

Myrina was silent as we reviewed this option. When she finally spoke, her words came slow and hushed. “You really went through some rough stuff, huh? I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. People don’t get the Soul Mage Class offered to them without something terrible happening.”

“I’ll be alright. Any thoughts on it?”

Myrina shook her head. “If it were me, I wouldn’t take it. Soul Mage on its own isn’t too bad, but a lot of the classes you can upgrade it to, like Mind Slaver and Soul Devourer, are particularly nasty. The Amazonian Empire is a bit lax about hunting down Soul Mages—much less zealous about it than some of the supposedly ‘righteous’ factions, but those evolved classes are truly evil. You won’t be welcome in most sectors of the multiverse if you decide to go that route. But I have to admit, it is a powerful option. And there might be a reasonable evolution you can take later down the line, instead of the two I just mentioned.”

I noticed Myrina hadn’t said not to take it, just that it would be risky. And I had the title Death Defier, which directly stated I had an affinity for Soul Magic. But was I willing to live as a fugitive for it?

I set Soul Mage aside for the time being. I felt Myrina grow tense next to me as she saw the contemplative expression on my face. She said nothing. Thankfully, the next option was a welcome respite from the grim subject of the previous class.

Playboy (Rare) - While others spend their days mastering the swords or spells, a Playboy masters the hearts of people. Those attracted to him will be putty in his hands, and their countless lovers will be desperate to please them. They may not be that fearsome on their own, but who needs to fight when they can seduce others to do the fighting for them? This class makes use of social stats to facilitate interpersonal relationships.

When I saw Playboy on offer, I realized I really shouldn’t have picked Fabulous Phallus. As nice a skill as it was to have, it opened the door for the System to feed me all sorts of

odd things. It was like clicking on the wrong ad on your work computer. You just had to accept that these things would pop up forever after that.

Myrina was staring at me with a grin on her face that spread from ear to ear. “Now, how did you earn this class, Carter?”

I rolled my eyes. “Honestly, I’m not really sure.”

Myrina giggled and needled me in the side with her fingers. “No way! Spill the secret! How many women have you taken advantage of?”

I held my hands up and chuckled while she poked me where she knew I was ticklish. “None, I swear!”

She narrowed her brows. “I have my doubts about that.”

“Okay, there were a few women in my survivor group who seem to respect me a bit. It’s nothing much, though.” I watched Myrina’s face carefully for a reaction. I was looking for anything negative. but she wore only a pensive smile.

“Hmmm...” Myrina slipped around to sit on my lap as she gazed at my eyes.

“Alright, I kissed one of them. Happy?” I said.

Inwardly, I felt my heart tighten. I didn’t really like talking about Sakura when I was with Myrina. The thought of having to pick between one of them made my soul ache.

“A kiss, huh?” Myrina tapped her chin. “I guess that would be enough.”

“You’re not... jealous?” I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

“Nah, you’re my buddy, Carter! And I’m your patron. Your victories are my victories!” Myrina replied.

“Oh. I... see...” Myrina’s words left me a little confused, but I accepted her answer all the same. I was pretty sure she was flirting with me, but she was as supportive as a friend would be at my explanation of me kissing another woman. It was strange, to say the least.

Myrina joked a bit about me taking the Class, but I had other ideas. If nothing else, being a Playboy wouldn’t help me kill Craig. I turned my attention to the last class available to me.

Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge (Epic) - These scholars walk a dangerous road, and their paths can lead to the heights of greatness or utter ruin. While not explicitly a mage classification, the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge forsakes physical power for strength through magic and to discern the hidden truths of the universe.

As a master of the occult and unknown, these scholars defy even the system as they reach into the furthest depths of their realities. Their powers allow them to draw on ancient secrets long forgotten to most races.

Scholars of Forbidden Knowledge reject traditional stat and level quantification. Taking this skill will replace your stats and levels with a bespoke subsystem suitable for the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class, and your level will be estimated based on your overall stats.

Be warned, this path is dangerous, and irrevocable once taken. Scholars of Forbidden Knowledge tread on the knife's edge of disaster, and one wrong step can lead to the utter destruction of their own soul.

“Epic. That means good, right?” I asked Myrina, as she remained silent. Her brows were furrowed in concentration.

“Yes, it’s good... very good. In fact, I think this is the Class the System wants you to take. You have a death curse that prevents you from gaining levels, and so it offers you this scholar class that looks to be an ability of the cultivator line.”

“Cultivator line? Like farming?”

“It’s a way to level... without leveling. Some say that such abilities predate the System itself. Your title ability gives you a way to gain stat points, and this gives you a way to gain levels. Between the two, you’ll have completely compensated for your disadvantage of not being able to kill monsters for levels.”

I frowned. “It almost seems like I have to pick this class. Are there any downsides to it?”

“Yes. I’m not familiar with this specific scholar class, but usually they contain an eclectic mix of abilities that often don’t contribute directly to combat—or any practical application, really. The scholar class is for academics.”

She sighed. "Except all the real academic disciplines are filled with people with a normal class and an academic job title. Scholars are usually a bit of an oddball class, and to take it is a gamble. Most end up dead, but I know of several who wield such power that the entire Arcadia Multiverse knows their names."

I could live with that.

"They're also those most familiar with the workings of the system," Myrina continued, "and if any class could figure out how to remove your curse, it would be a scholar class. The choice is yours. I have no doubt you could become a skilled mage or swordsman, despite your curse."

I let out a slow breath. "Then I am left to choose between safety in mediocrity, or risk it all for greatness?"

Myrina returned my gaze with a silent intensity that set my heart beating faster. I sensed she was even more nervous than I was about this decision.

"These other scholars you mentioned. How well can they fight? I can't shoot myself in the foot before facing Craig."

Myrina shrugged. "It all depends on the specifics of your class. Scholars of Elemental Fire can be quite deadly, since their understanding of fire allows them to cast fire spells far beyond their normal level and empowers them far beyond their normal strength."

"That sounds pretty good. Are there other powerful scholar types?"

“Scholars of Life and Death are some of the only non-holy classes that can perform resurrection magic. Scholars of Prophecy have a knack for knowing the future... and sometimes changing it. But a Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge? I'm not sure. Hold on, let me check my book on known Classes.”

Myrina winked out for a moment, and when her image reappeared, she was holding a large, dusty tome.

“Show me the Class Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge!” Myrina commanded, and the book's pages flipped open. Pages streamed by, starting from the front cover and continuing without stopping until the last page closed.

“Huh. I guess it isn't in here. Well, it was a long shot, considering it's an epic class. The Amazon Empire has all the common classes categorized, almost all the uncommon ones, and a lot of the rare ones. But past that,” she admitted, “our data grows scarce. It seems like most of the other scholar classes are only rare, though. Maybe you can figure something out by reading up on those.”

I thanked Myrina for her efforts, but I already knew what I had to do. I pictured myself as a mage, firing spells left and right and cutting through waves of enemies. But as many as I slew, more came at me. And as powerful as my spells became, Myrina remained worlds away. The same was true for swordsman or any of the other classes.

But this epic class promised something more. It promised a chance to unlock the secrets of the universe and to do what no one else could—if only I had the will to realize it. Sure, it risked the very destruction of my soul, but I'd already seen the System's version of an afterlife and didn't care for it.

I rolled the dice and took my first steps toward unlocking the secrets of the universe.

21 I received several new abilities with my new class,

I received several new abilities with my new class, and they popped up before me, one after another.

Congratulations! You have chosen the epic class [Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge].

As a scholar, your thirst for knowledge knows no bounds, and you are willing to delve into the darkest corners of the multiverse to uncover its secrets. Devour knowledge and wield it as a weapon against all who oppose you. But beware, the cost for such power is great, and the knowledge you seek has driven all Scholars of Forbidden Knowledge before you to madness.

Your Willpower and Perception stats have been augmented by the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class stat Insight, signifying your understanding.

Your Vitality and Strength stats have been augmented by the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class stat Aberration, signifying your connection to the otherworldly.

Your Intelligence and Agility stats have been augmented by the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class stat Arcana, signifying your ability to manipulate reality.

May your thirst for knowledge be unquenchable, and may your power be unmatched. The secrets of the multiverse are yours to unravel, scholar.

You are now a Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge. This title is equipped, and it will appear when you are examined.

You have been granted access to a new resource: Mania

Unlike Mana or Stamina, which are consumed in combat, mania increases in proportion to your use of Forbidden Scholar abilities and empowers all aspects of your class. Be warned, exceeding your safe Mania thresholds leads to madness and a loss of control. Use this resource sparingly.

The warning was a bit ominous, to say the least. All Scholars of Forbidden Knowledge before me had been driven mad? That might have been nice to know before I made my selection.

Now everyone who looked at me would think of me as Carter, the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge. Or maybe just... The Scholar. You'd think I'd need to get a few more degrees to earn a title like that, but apparently, dying and muddling my way through the secrets of the System to resurrect myself was enough.

Your 3 remaining Class points have been assigned automatically.

+1 Insight

+1 Aberration

+1 Arcana

I felt the surge of unfamiliar power flow through me. The way stats felt had changed as the System's names for them had changed. Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge was a square peg in a round hole that was the usual stat system, and so the System had designed new stats for me.

It felt like ice and fire at once. Hot and cold, painful and yet pleasurable. The sensation was beyond words, and as quickly as it came it was gone. I looked at my new gains, curious to see what I was working with, now that they had shifted so dramatically.

Carter Smith (Human, Level 10, Rank F)

Human racial stats (Level 10)

Strength: 13

Agility: 11

Perception: 15

Vitality: 19

Intelligence: 33

Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Class Stats (Level 1)

Insight: 1

Aberration: 1

Arcana: 1

Proficiencies:

Caster 6

Neutral Mana 5

Improvised Weapons 4

Rifle 3

Pistol 1

Regeneration 4

Titles:

Blessed of the System (Unique, Temporary)

Forerunner of Earth (Legendary)

Integration Survivor (Legendary)

Gallant Guardian (Rare)

Hero of Sakura Miyamoto (Common, Temporary)

Mechanical Master (Common)

Death Defier (Legendary)

Soul Vampire (Legendary)

Great Ancestor (Mythic)

Racial Skills:

Mind over Flesh (Uncommon)

Mana Bolt (Common)

Power Jump (Common)

Iron Will (Common)

Fabulous Phallus (Common)

Soul Vampirism (Legendary)

Sure Step (Uncommon)

My class had an entirely new set of attributes that would start from the ground up—with a slight bump from what should have been my assignable stats from level 10, meaning they now matched my level. The three different stats would certainly make me odd to look at for anyone using the examine skill on me. Hopefully, it would make it harder for my enemies to pin down my exact power level.

I was a little concerned that I could no longer see my regular stats. I worried that they were gone, but Myrina soon corrected me. Insight, Aberration, and Arcana were a feature of my class, but not of my race—or any future second class I might get. I was still able to see my Strength, Agility, Perception, Vitality, Intelligence, and Willpower by switching out of my class menu.

"You can still level up as a human, it seems. It's just your class that's all weird by leveling up and increasing the three new stats that define it," Myrina explained.

She shook her head. "What a strange class... but very useful for someone in your situation who's going to have a hard time leveling up otherwise. Your three class stats look like odd combinations of your old stats, only this time scaled so that they equate to whatever your class level is."

"Got it. So, basically, if I boost Insight, Aberration, or Arcana enough I will go up a level." It was starting to feel like this class was built just for someone with the Soul Vampire title like I had, because that was the best way I could see to level the class.

Congratulations! You have unlocked the class stat Insight!

Your title, Blessed of the System, grants you a skill book! As these are Epic Class stats, your selection of skill books has been upgraded accordingly.

The same message repeated for Aberration and Arcana right after that, and I felt an excitement growing deep in my chest. Getting new stats meant I got to enjoy the bonuses of reaching the ten and twenty milestones with all three class stats all over again—meaning I'd have more skill books to pick from.

As these are unique class stats, your free skill books have been converted to Class Ability books.

The System presented me with a list of nine class abilities—three for each of my new stats. The skills I would have gained from my 'Blessed of the System' title were all upgraded to Class Abilities. This enabled me to pick six new class skills. I poured over them one at a time with Myrina's help, though never having heard of any of the skills before, even her help was limited—the best she could do was offer me her best guesses.

Eventually, I settled on six new abilities to fill out my new class.

Available Class Abilities:

- **Study (Rare) - Observe an item, object, or corpse to understand the thing or creature's uses and functions. This skill functions as an upgraded form of the Perception skill Analyze, and provides all features of the Analyze skill without using a skill slot.**
- **Disassemble (Rare) - Smother an item, object, or corpse with your mana and break it into pieces, neatly organizing its component parts in piles for**

other tasks.

- **Enlightenment (Rare) - Ponder your own observations of Forbidden Knowledge. Using this skill creates instances of Mania, bolstering your powers. Be warned, accumulating too much mania will strain your mind to the point of breaking.**
- **Eldritch Augmentation (Rare) - Reinforce your body with energies and concepts from beyond the veil. For brief instances, your Arcana stat will be combined with your Aberration stat, massively increasing your physical abilities.**
- **Blood Sacrifice (Rare) - Sacrifice some of your health points to deal direct unblockable damage to the target.**
- **Corrupting Mark (Rare) - All physical attacks leave a mark upon the target with dark corrupting energy that deals poison damage over time. Each subsequent use of Corrupting Mark on the same target increases the potency of the poison and adds additional damage. The scholar can consume all marks on a target at once to deal a massive burst of damage, however consuming the marks also removes them.**

"You're lucky," Myrina said. "Even a family like mine would have a difficult time acquiring so many skills books for someone with such an odd class. You're fortunate the System is paying for everything as long as that bonus is up."

"I feel less lucky and more... edgy," I replied.

Myrina laughed. "Your skills do seem to have a certain theme to them. But unlike many who pick skills of shadow and darkness merely for aesthetics, yours are the real deal. The only downside is that I fear you're filling up your skill slots rather rapidly."

"What's that mean for me?"

"Nothing yet," Myrina replied. "But eventually, you'll have to ditch your old skills. A soul can only hold on to so many powers at once. You said the System gives you the option to upgrade skills instead of selecting new ones? I would choose that option whenever you don't see something immediately useful."

"Noted."

I looked at the first of the new abilities my class had given me. Study was appreciated, since I had already been lamenting the fact that I couldn't pick up both Analyze and Examine skills. The two seemed useful, even if Examine was more applicable in scanning for threats and surviving. But now, I had something just as good as Analyze to replace it.

Myrina spent the next few minutes spitting out one bit of advice after another. She'd written everything I needed to know out on a piece of paper, but had forgotten about it for the early half of our meeting. She started reading it off to me with just the few minutes we had left. I found a notepad and a pen in one of the survival kits near me and scribbled down as much of what she said as I could.

"Raise your stats to twenty in every attribute to get new abilities quickly. Once you hit level twenty, you'll have gotten all the free skills you're going to get, since the next stat the System considers a milestone is going to be either fifty or one hundred. Concentrate your efforts on the stat that powers your main combat class or ability."

She paused, looking up from her notes. "I'm not sure how your stats work, but I'd be willing to bet your best spells are going to scale with Arcana. Also, don't forget to pick up some sort of retreat skill for when you get in over your head."

She continued reading her notes. “Be prepared for the end of the third day post-integration, when the blessing expires. That will also mark the start of battles between newly integrated worlds. The first fights will be easy—but don’t get complacent.”

She gave me a stern look, which erupted into a grin. “And don’t forget to pack good socks. Many warriors who could defeat every foe fall in battle because of poor foot care.”

I rolled my eyes, but she kept reading her notes. “Get your hands on a settlement obelisk for the jobs it offers. Enchanters always make good money, but make sure you level your job fast because once resource scarcity hits, raw ingredients often become more expensive than final products because so many people are trying to grind levels...”

She went on for minutes on end, and I soon realized how Doctor Roswell’s assistant felt with his sore, ink-stained hands when we’d rescued the clinic from zombies. I wondered if he’d survived Craig’s purge.

Fortunately, my Intelligence stat meant I had the spare brainpower to let my mind wander while also taking notes and listening to what Myrina was saying. I would have killed for that ability back in college. It took me a few moments to realize she’d finally stopped speaking.

“Is that everything?” I turned to look at Myrina, who was scanning through her notes one last time.

Myrina frowned. “Not even close. I’ll have to summarize the second page.” She blew out a heavy sigh. “Oh well, that should last you until you’re able to activate the token for real and come to me for a full tutorial. Oh! And one final thing! I need you to confirm. Are you interested in accepting patronage from the Amazonian Empire?”

“Sure.”

She snorted. “You have to formally agree—just say ‘Yes, I accept the patronage offered by the Amazonian Empire’.”

I smirked, but did as requested. “Yes,” I repeated, “I accept the patronage offered by the Amazonian Empire.”

You have accepted an offer of Patronage!

The Amazonian Empire will support you if you prove worthy.

New Quest Available!

Your potential patron has demanded you prove your worth. To earn an audience with the Amazonian Empire, you must complete the following three objectives within three months:

- **Raise a heathen woman in the Amazonian way, bringing her strength stat up to a minimum of 30 with a melee combat class.**
- **Defeat a rival male of a similar class type (melee, magical, etc.) of level 25 or greater in a life and death battle over a woman.**
- **Prove your virility!**

“The first task usually refers to the quest taker themselves,” Myrina explained. “Normally, the tokens are given to women. You’re a bit of an exception, though. I tried to drop the requirement entirely, but the System wouldn’t allow it.”

She shrugged. “Slaying a magic user over level 25 is something you should get to, eventually. Magical monsters will count, too—I made sure of that.”

“As for proving your virility, you’ll have to figure that one out on your own...” Myrina gave me a wink, wrapped her arms around my chest, and then vanished in a cloud of light as quickly as she’d come.

I accepted her quest. It was the only way I'd see her again, after all. The requirements were odd... very odd.

Defeat a rival male in battle over a woman? What, did the Amazonian Empire think men were like baboons? And what did proving my virility mean? Hopefully Myrina could explain it to me the next time we met. Our meeting had been short—an all too brief thirty minutes—but I felt a smile touching my lips. I'd been right to trust in her all these years.

The empty roof turned dark, with only a cup of cold coffee to comfort me as I sat there in silence. My enhanced perception meant that there was enough light for me to see by, but I suddenly felt both empty and alone. I didn't like the feeling. So I filled the silence with action.

There was a lot to do, and little time to waste. Hopefully, Craig was already asleep, blissfully drifting off in la-la land, thinking he was safe. Giving me the time I needed to close the gap between us.

The first thing I needed to do, was to test out my new skills.

I touched the gun on the ground before me that had belonged to the sniper on the roof I'd taken out. When I touched it and activated the skill, I became the gun. I felt the trigger like it was a part of me. I remembered every time I had been pulled. I couldn't see faces, but I felt the bullets leave my barrel one after another. My skill stretched further back to the factory in which the gun was made, showing me the barrel being drilled out and fitted onto the body, the stock being carved from wood. I even caught a glimpse of the tree the stock had been taken from.

For a moment, I had every scrap of knowledge needed to make the gun—not the skills or the tools to make them, but the raw academic knowledge that included every part's name and what went into the process of assembly that resulted in the rifle in my hands. That knowledge alone would be enough for me to start a gun factory—if I had a bunch of tools, the raw materials, and the time to spare.

Unfortunately, the knowledge started slipping from me as soon as I learned it. Study provided so much information it was hard to keep it all in my head—not like the Examine skill's ability to simply list a bunch of information in a system message. Fortunately, Study actually replaced the Analyze skill for people with that ability, so it had that capability as well.

The skill ended and fell apart toward the end, signifying a lack of anything of interest specific to my class or current class abilities and general skill. To gain the true benefit of the study skill, I would have to use it on items of interest—and probably in conjunction with my Enlightenment skill.

But it did put out a nice description for me.

Scoped Rifle (Common) - This weapon is an original creation of the human race, and it propels small lead projectiles at high speed, using the energy released by explosives contained in its ammunition. It causes small puncture wounds with

accuracy at great distances. The scope assists in aiming the rifle at far distances without the need for high perception.

It was a shame the skill didn't list the model of the rifle, but the System seemed like it was built so that someone without any knowledge of our world at all could figure out what things were and get by.

I wondered if Myrina had done this kind of thing when she'd first arrived on Earth. Looking back, I remembered feeling a tingle run up my spine when I was near her quite often, but I'd always just assumed that was due to her having such an intense gaze when she looked me up and down.

Next, I tested Enlightenment. The world around me seemed to shift and faded away. It was reminiscent of the time I'd spent in Purgatory. My body felt like it was wrapped tightly around me. The sensation was maddening.

The recent memories of that strange place had been starting to slip my mind until moments ago, but now they were restored with perfect clarity. I had been to the other side and back again. I had met Lyra, as well as having seen Ben and all the others Craig had killed. I had a promise to them left to complete.

Your Mania has increased to level 1: Dissonance.

The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge spells and abilities is increased by 20%

The notification shook me from my reverie. When I opened my eyes, the real world seemed more distant than it had been before. I was detached in some ways, yet at the same time, more fervor than ever burned within me.

From the description of Mania, I was pretty sure I'd gone a little bit insane.

I eased up on the skill. If I was already disoriented at Mania level one, there was no telling what higher levels of the ability would do. Still, a 20% boost to my powers was nothing to scoff at. Perhaps I'd use Mania once more before I faced Craig, since I was pretty sure I would need every advantage I could get. I just hoped I wouldn't go insane in the process.

I tried Disassemble on one bag of survival gear. I felt a whoosh of mana leave my body, and a moment later it surrounded the bag. Without any input from me, my ability pulled item after item out of the bag and spread them out along the ground. It wasn't a pile, so much as an array of components on display for me to see, with the original bag that used to contain everything left behind in the middle.

That would certainly be useful for unpacking equipment, but it didn't work the other way. Being able to pack things away would have made it a handy utility skill, but sadly I could only take things apart with the ability. But unlike the other two that were strictly abilities for use outside of combat, this one might actually have a combat application.

I found my next experiment victim licking at the blood stain that had been around the corpse of the sniper who'd fallen to his death near the side of the building. "Disassemble," I said as I pointed at the Scavenger Cockroach. Since it was only level two, my mana overwhelmed the creature, crushing it in its entirety.

The cockroach died, and my mana pulled it apart—just as it had pulled apart the bag and its contents. The cockroach disassembled before my eyes until it lay in pieces on the ground, a carapace there, a mass of blood there, a pile of guts in the middle, two eyes neatly piled in one corner, and a shiny bright gemstone right in the middle.

I picked up the gem and used the Analyze feature of Study to figure out what it was.

Scavenger Cockroach Core (Rare) - This item contains the essence of a Scavenger Cockroach. Numerous alchemical and enchantment uses.

I pocketed the tiny crystal, no bigger than my smallest fingernail. The skill would certainly make skinning monsters a whole lot easier. I remembered our attempt to skin that first Fire Squirrel we'd run across. This time, all I'd need to do was point at the corpse and sacrifice some mana.

I tested Disassemble several more times on other creatures. I was able to kill both kinds of cockroaches and one weaker rat with it. Unfortunately, the requirement that my mana be able to overwhelm my target was a tough one. The skill required more mana the stronger my target was, to where even something at level five quickly exhausted my reserves. Gone were the days when I could cast spells with impunity, assuming that I had unlimited mana.

But that didn't mean the ability was useless in a real fight. Far from it. It just meant that I first needed to wound something enough that it couldn't fight back against my mana. I could cast the spell as a finisher and end the fight. After all, no monster could fight back when it was literally lying in pieces.

My other skills were a lot more straightforward. Eldritch Augmentation gave me a brief boost to my physical stats, letting me jump higher, punch harder, and take a harder hit than I otherwise could. The downside was that it hurt like a bitch to use—that, and while using it, any other spell I was holding on to fell apart.

After testing Blood Sacrifice, I realized I'd rarely have an excuse not to open a fight by hurting myself. It seemed like a skill for a masochist, but it paired nicely with my Lifesteal ability. I could recover from the initial loss as the fight progressed, but my

opponent—hopefully—would not.

Corrupting Mark was a bit trickier. I hit a few giant cockroaches with it and they ambled around for about ten minutes, growing increasingly frantic all the while. More marks accelerated the process, but the true showstopper came when I placed a bunch of marks on the target and detonated them all at once.

Black tendrils burst from the body of that cockroach like they were tearing their way out from the inside, dealing massive damage in the process. It was rather disturbing to watch. I was limited to placing three corrupting marks on the cockroaches, since my ability killed them on their own before I could get more than that in place.

I wondered what this skill would be like with ten or more such marks on a target. With my new skills tested, I decided there was no more time to waste. It was time to return to the office.

Things were much the same as they were when I'd crawled out of the dumpster—except that the quest had to have less than an hour on it. I targeted the back exit, planning on remaining unseen for as long as possible. The more of Craig's bandits I could take out, the weaker he and his goons would be.

They were still fighting against the quest monsters, but it looked like their numbers were thinning out. They should be nearing the end of the quest. I checked my quest log.

Quest Time Remaining: 30 minutes.

The quest wasn't finished yet. Strange. I would have expected the fighting to get more intense as the quest neared its end. Perhaps this was just a lull before the next wave of monsters arrived, even stronger than those before it.

I had hoped for more monsters to cover my attack, but I'd have to make do with what I had. The first thing I did was to make a little noise. It was a counterintuitive plan, at first, but I wanted to draw some of them away from their posts so I could take them out quietly. Drumming my fingers against the dumpster did nicely.

"Hey, did you hear that?" One of Craig's bandits asked.

Bandit Barbarian - Level 10

"It's probably another zombie. Just fire a few shots at the dumpster," another replied.

Bandit Buccaneer - Level 11

I was sensing a theme to Craig's followers. All of them were some sort of variation of the bandit class. Fortunately, I already had Deflect equipped. I was pretty sure I had a few bullets still lodged somewhere in my back that hadn't worked their way out quite yet, and I had no plans to add to their number any time soon.

I made myself scarce as the pair of bandits fired a bunch of bullets at the dumpster, peppering the thing with holes. From the crumpled bits of lead on the ground and the gouges already taken out of the dumpster, this wasn't the first time they'd used that strategy to kill zombies before they could crawl out of the dumpster.

Unfortunately for them, the person making the noise worrying them so much was no zombie. I drummed my hand against the lid of a nearby trash can.

“Ah crap, it’s still alive. Go over there and kill it,” the Bandit Buccaneer ordered the Bandit Barbarian.

“I did it last time!” the Barbarian whined.

“Rank hath its privileges,” the Buccaneer replied, laughing. “I’m higher level than you.”

“Only because you got to execute a bunch of those office chumps, and I had to stand bandit outside...” the Barbarian grumbled. “Damn lucky. Next time the boss is putting together a firing squad, I have to get in on it...”

I could hear them perfectly, even from my hiding place across the street from the dumpster I was setting up as my target. Part of that was my enhanced perception, but part was the fact that the city streets were so quiet. At this time of night, there were usually still people shopping. Crownhill had a younger crowd, being a small, tech-focused town. Because of that, there were more bars and concerts than a town our size usually possessed. But all of them were empty now. The only noises to be heard were the skittering of giant cockroaches or the clawing of rats breaking into homes and raiding pantries.

I waited until the Barbarian was just about at the dumpster. He opened the lid, peering inside with a flashlight taped to the end of his gun. There was some movement in the dumpster, which meant some of the bodies were still functional undead. Perfect.

I hit him in the back of the head with a Mana Bolt, which left a single Corrupting Mark on him. He stumbled forward, head leaning into the dumpster. Some undead arms grabbed

him by the shirt collar and tugged. He could have torn himself free, but I hit him with Mana Bolt again. He toppled forward, falling into the dumpster face first. The zombies within it started dragging him in. I could see them climbing up his body now. Most of them had been shot full of holes, and one of them was just had its upper torso and one arm—the rest being nothing more than dangling flesh.

It wasn't enough to put the Barbarian down, but the third Mana Bolt and stacked Corrupting Mark shoved him far enough into the dumpster that the living zombies were able to pull him in with what little remained of their intact arms, jaws, and teeth.

He screamed, and the bandit, still standing by his post, shouted.

“Jackson! Damn it! You dumbass...” The Buccaneer glanced back at his post. He probably wasn't supposed to leave it without getting a replacement. But with a dying comrade right there in front of him, he must have thought he could run off, save his fellow bandit, and be back at his post before anyone noticed.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The moment both of them were near the dumpster, I struck. I targeted the healthy one with Blood Sacrifice, taking a dip in my health pool that the following slew of attacks would hopefully fill right back up again.

The Bandit Buccaneer clutched at his chest and gasped.

I felt an identical pain deep in my chest, but I was ready for it and he wasn't. The first bandit was still struggling with the undead biting and dragging him deeper into the dumpster. His levels weren't anything special, but they were enough that he was stronger than any of the undead—especially in their crippled state.

It was only the sheer number of arms that were giving him trouble. He'd pulled a knife out of his trousers and hacked at wrists and necks to put some of the zombies down, but he was making slow progress. The appearance of the Buccaneer, however, would change things in short order.

He'd recovered from my surprise attack with Blood Sacrifice. He still had his gun, and he fired into the mass of heads in the dumpster, putting down one zombie after another. They went still as their heads exploded like ripe fruit.

That would have been the end of things, except for my sudden attack. I still carried the sniper rifle that I'd taken off the man I'd killed earlier, and I aimed it now at the buccaneer. I got two shots off before something jammed and I tossed the gun aside, following up with a Mana Bolt.

My first bullet missed, drawing the attention of the Buccaneer as he jumped in his boots. The second shot would most likely have missed as well, if he hadn't walked right into it. That bullet dug a deep gouge in his back.

If his vitality had been lower, it probably would have blown a chunk out of him. That rifle was shooting big bullets meant to take a man down in a single shot before the integration. Since the integration, though, that had become a lot harder to do. But the bullets were still quite deadly.

I stopped bothering to hide and stood, firing my Mana Bolts one after another. The Bandit Barbarian who'd managed to clamber out of the dumpster was bruised and battered from all the zombie bites, so I targeted him first with my follow up spell.

“Disassemble.”

As I spoke the words, my mana flowed out of me. The Barbarian struggled against my spell for a moment, but he'd exhausted much of his energy fighting the zombies. His own mana came to his defense, but it was pitifully weak. He must not have put any points into Intelligence since the integration.

His body exploded in a fountain of energy. His flesh shriveled up, unraveled, and drifted gently to the ground. His bones tore free of muscles, eyes, and organs. Everything from his teeth to his finger bones were torn apart and arrayed in neat, orderly lines across the ground. The man was dead before he even knew what had happened.

The Buccaneer whirled on me, firing his pistol wildly. The muzzle flash from my rifle must have revealed my position, and now I was exposed. But Deflect caught the first of the bullets, and I ducked low enough to miss the others. I twisted around from my crouch, counterattacking with Mana Bolt.

The invisible bursts of energy struck the buccaneer one after another, and without a muzzle flash in the dark he didn't even know where he was being attacked from. He ducked behind the cover of the dumpster, but I used Power Jump to close the distance between us and was on top of him in a flash.

I hit him with several more Mana Bolts. His shoulders slumped as my Corrupting Marks took their toll. He turned then, finally ready to run for help. That was when I detonated all the marks. Black tendrils shot from the man's body, tearing their way free from his flesh as he screamed in agony and eventually collapsed. The tendrils from my Corrupting Marks slithered away into the shadows.

I felt a rush of power as Lifesteal stole some of their health and returned it to me. It was more than I expected, and I started feeling like myself again for the first time since my death—the new level probably helped as well.

Congratulations! You have advanced to human level 11!

Congratulations! You have advanced to Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 2!

I assigned my stat points, doing as Myrina suggested and pushing my stats towards the nearest milestone to take advantage of the free skill books. That was when something unexpected popped up before me.

Choose a luck skill book!

- **Book of Lucky Coin (Common) - Manifest a lucky coin that always lands the way you want it to.**
- **Book of Treasure Hunter (Common) - Slightly increase your odds of finding valuable loot from System rewards.**
- **Book of Share Curse (Uncommon) - Transfer half of your negative luck curse to a target.**

I hadn't expected to see anything for Luck, since it was a hidden stat. I had no idea when I'd even hit ten points in Luck, or how I'd done it. But I guess if any stat was to give me a lucky break, it would be my Luck stat.

The third choice must have come to me thanks to my Death Curse. The ability to get rid of half of the tremendously negative effect of the curse seemed almost too good to be true. I selected it in a heartbeat.

Would this mitigate my penalty towards gaining experience from monsters? Maybe not, considering it looked like it only transferred the bad luck over. But I certainly didn't like

the idea of being massively unlucky during a fight. It seems this ability would even the odds. And deep down, I hoped to get a few offers to upgrade it in the future. Maybe a more powerful version of the skill could directly combat the negative effects of my Death Curse.

Despite my obvious investments into Intelligence, mine was truly a balanced race and class. I was essentially getting a point in everything across the board for my class with each level up. Hopefully, that would be enough to cover my weaknesses. It was clear that any fine-tuning with my class was meant to be done with the Enlightenment skill, providing stat points beyond what the levels gave.

But what I needed now was power and survivability. Unlike other classes that had a clear, single attribute to focus on, my class seemed to use a little of all of them. That meant I was on my own when determining which stat to focus on.

Disassemble, and Mana Bolt both focused on Mana, and they were my primary damage-dealing abilities. For now, I would put most of my points into Intelligence—just as I was doing before—except for throwing a few into vitality here and there. Actually, I needed to make that my first priority.

Dying sucked, and I was pretty sure Lyra would have something to say about me using the same method to come back from the dead a second time. I had to treat this life as though it was my last. Because it probably was.

I put my free points into vitality. Despite stealing a bit of health from the people I'd slain so far, I still wasn't operating with a full health bar—not a surprise, really, considering how badly I'd been wounded. Bulking up my stats where it counted would make surviving long enough to heal the rest of the way up a safer bet. What I was about to do wasn't something some glass cannon mage could pull off.

+4 Vitality

Satisfied, I turned back to the office, which glowed in my vision with the shelter name overhead. I turned my ear toward it and listened for the sound of alarms and shouting. Everything was as quiet as before, though. Nobody had noticed me taking out two of Craig's men.

Excellent. Now it was time to do it again.

22 I ruthlessly eliminated Craig's guards, one after the other.

I ruthlessly eliminated Craig's guards, one after the other. They finally realized something was going on after I'd killed the sixth one guarding the doors. To be honest, that was further than I thought I would get.

Congratulations! You have advanced to human level 12!

Congratulations! You have advanced to Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 4!

Congratulations! You have reached a perception milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, grants you a free skill book!

- **Book of Farsight (Common) - View a momentary image of a distant location.**
- **Book of Dark sight (Common) - Possess black and white vision, even in complete and total darkness.**
- **Evolve Book of Examine (Common)... to Examine (Uncommon) - Moderately increase the amount of information provided by examining a target.**

Taking Myrina's recent advice into account, I used the opportunity to enhance my Examine skill. It seemed the most versatile of the abilities I had available to me at the

moment. Next, I put some points into strength and agility, following Myrina's advice to push all my attributes to 20 so I could get those skills or potential upgrades.

Killing humans made the levels come quickly. This must have been how Craig felt when killing Ben and the others. That I was leveling the same way Craig had done annoyed me—but it didn't stop me. The world had changed, and upon my resurrection, I'd changed with it.

These men and women had joined Craig, making them my enemies. The new me would bottle up all my love and friendship and save it for those I trusted. Everyone else would get only cold ruthlessness. That was the resolution I made myself as I attacked in the dead of the night. It was my explanation for why I felt satisfied each time I killed one of Craig's men, instead of being horrified that I'd slain another human.

Was this who I was, now? A monster that could only level by killing my fellow humans? In time, would I become as bad as Craig? Those were all questions for another day, though, preferably when I was using my Enlightenment Skill. For now, I still had people to kill.

Craig's bandits rallied, and they started gathering up the others. With two of their level 10's eliminated, they needed to reinforce the flank I'd disabled quickly. Otherwise, they'd have to deal with monsters coming inside the office.

It wouldn't be long now before all of them were springing to action—though for the time being, it seemed nobody had bothered to get Craig or investigate the sudden deaths. They were still chalking up my strikes to monsters sneaking behind their lines. I suspected Craig was off guarding one of the flanks. He wouldn't let his men get ahead of him in levels, so he'd be killing as many monsters as possible to maintain his advantage in levels.

They started organizing a group of lower-level fighters to make up for the two I'd just killed. True to Craig's methodology, they gathered up all the people from Ben's teams and threw them out into the cold, making up for the lesser quality of Ben's fighters with quantity.

Much to my relief, I spotted Frank and Marcus among those thrown out to search for this hidden threat and cover the weakened flanks. If I could get them alone, I might bring them into my plan—but that was a risk I wasn't sure I was ready to take.

"Alright, you maggots. Unlike the ladies who we'll guard just because their tushes are cute, you lot have to earn your keep," one of Craig's men said. "Fend off any monsters coming from this side. Move it! Retreat into the office before the quest is over, and you'll face our guns instead of the monster's teeth and claws. Craig's crew doesn't take in cowards!"

Clearly, Frank and Marcus were being given one of the most dangerous jobs. The two of them were far ahead of the others in levels, and both were armed with little more than sticks. The men more loyal to Craig had guns and sat safely in the back. I doubted Craig's men would weep if Frank and Marcus died. In fact, that would probably be convenient for them.

I saw Frank and Marcus cast each other a look and knew they were considering making a run for it. That was probably part of the plan as well. This was an opportunity to get those who planned on ditching the shelter to flee with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, rather than waiting until after they'd consumed ammo, food, and equipment. From what few glimpses I'd seen, Craig was building a culture of brutal meritocracy with enforced gender roles strict enough to make the Romans look like they'd promoted women's rights.

Most of those forced outside were men, except for a few women who'd clearly put far more points into strength than charisma. Knowing Craig, he only wanted demure feminine women, or something stupid like that, and was perfectly happy to send anyone

who didn't fit that mold either to their deaths or fleeing for their lives.

That had me a bit worried. What was happening to Sakura and Bridget? Both were pretty strong, and I feared Craig might have decided they were too strong.

In the end, I decided Frank and Marcus could take care of themselves. If they decided to seize this opportunity to run away from Craig's crew, that was probably for the best. What was important, is that they were safe and free for the moment.

The monster they thought they were flushing out was me, so they weren't likely to run into anything they couldn't handle. Having all of Craig's guards outside patrolling for a threat they'd never find was the perfect opportunity for me to slip unseen into the building.

It's amazing how easy it is to sneak past people when you don't try to hide. Most of Craig's crew had only seen my bruised and battered corpse, so I should look like another stranger to them. As long as I avoided anyone who'd worked at the office with me before, I'd remain unnoticed. Thankfully, most of Craig's people had been recruited from elsewhere, and they'd already sent anyone who could have identified me outside in a vain attempt to search for the monster that had been me.

I avoided the exit Marcus and Frank were stationed at. Fortunately, Craig's forces around the other exits were still reorganizing and I went unnoticed in the crowd milling about. I sensed a tingle run up my spine as someone Examined me, and their eyes widened when they saw my level.

They swiftly stepped aside. "You there..."

He looked like he wanted to say something, but I turned. Something in my eyes made

him swallow his words.

My hand darted out from under my robes, and I fired a Mana Bolt under his chin. The force of the blow was swift and sure, and it snapped his neck in one blow. His level was low, and his vitality wasn't high enough of a defense. That one attack was enough to put him down.

He slumped backwards, and I set him down behind the barricade he was defending. Hopefully, whoever found him would assume a monster got by the lines and killed him. I only needed to buy a few minutes—that should be enough time to do what I needed to do.

I slipped past this group without anyone else saying a word. Eventually, I would slip up and someone would catch me. But hopefully by then I'd have already located both Bridget and Sakura, and would be ready to deal with Craig directly.

I found the missing woman just inside. There was a whole team of them, with brushes and mops scrubbing the blood stains out of the office carpet. I saw more of them hard at work in the rest of the office.

Someone had expanded the tiny kitchen dramatically, and most of the tables that hadn't been disassembled to build the barricades were arrayed there, loaded with food. Some of that food came from the local grocery store, and some had been harvested from the monsters slain outside. Teams of women were busy preparing and preserving both types, as they worked to feed a small army.

I spotted Bridget one door down the hall, hunched over a disassembled gun with a scowl as she repaired it. There were other women nearby, though, and it looked like Craig had turned this part of the office into an assembly line, where women repaired weapons and equipment. Unlike the cooks and cleaners, this position also had a guard stationed over

it. He loomed over Bridget's shoulder.

The coat I'd picked up had a hood on it, and I pulled that up and stuck my hands in my pockets, hunching down so my face wasn't visible. While Craig's goons couldn't identify me, Bridget certainly could. Seeing Bridget was a tremendous relief. For all his evil ways, Craig didn't seem to be abusing the women under his care—even if he had reduced most of them to cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry.

I'd half expected him to turn them into sex slaves or something.

I had one other person I needed to see before I made my move. I needed to act fast, because the longer I took, the more opportunities would arise for me to get caught. I stuck to the sides of the office and walked fast, making good use of my knowledge of the building to avoid people while still having a good view of the crowd.

My increased perception was helpful as well. One quick glance into a room was enough for me to see everything worth seeing. I was in and out before anyone even looked my way.

My eyes had changed for the better at some point. Before, it was really only possible to see with the greatest clarity when looking straight ahead, but now I could see just fine over the entirety of my field of view. I could even read signs when just seeing them out of the corner of my eye. I hadn't noticed it because of the darkness outside, but the enhancements to my body were almost surreal.

I headed back to the other side of the office, the one I'd worked in since being hired to work for Sakura. I hadn't seen her yet and, based on Craig's words earlier, I hoped to find her here. My instincts didn't disappoint me.

Craig hadn't been joking when he'd said he was going to put her in charge of hauling buckets of shit for the shelter. I remember Ben mentioning the toilets had stopped working. His working theory, at the time, was that our connection to the city sewers had been cut by the integration. Unfortunately, this meant that as soon as the pipes flooded, they were finished.

As a temporary solution, Craig had his people place buckets in each of the stalls, and he stationed someone in the bathroom to haul those buckets outside every time someone filled them. Right now, that unlucky person was Sakura. I spotted her returning with a bucket and was surprised by how much higher her level was.

Sakura Miyamoto - Level 9

Class: None

Fighting style: Melee combatant

I spotted a few cuts on her palms, knuckles, and knees. The goo on her boot looked like the remains of a cockroach. I instantly realized her plan. Every time she went outside, she grabbed a few more monster kills. It was a perfect way to keep leveling right under Craig's nose.

He probably expected her to fall far behind in levels, but Sakura had ideas of her own. I wasn't sure what she was planning, but the grim glint in her eyes told me she was planning something risky. I had something else in mind for her, though.

I approached from behind, using Sure Step to remain unheard and unseen. The skill told me exactly where to step to remain in Sakura's blind spot. I stood behind her as she returned to her post in the bathroom.

"Don't scream," I murmured softly as I put a hand over her mouth to keep her from

being surprised at my sudden appearance. The last thing I wanted was to draw any undue attention.

I felt her teeth scrape against my hand, and I had to pull it back before I lost a finger. I hurriedly pulled my hood down with my free hand so that when Sakura whipped around with a hand balled up in a fist, my face was the first thing she saw.

The punch that followed seemed almost like an instinctual reaction, but behind it, she put enough force to bash someone's skull in. Something told me this wasn't the first time someone had tried to corner her here in the bathroom.

"Sakura! It's me!" I hissed.

I stepped back and tried to catch her hand, but despite the levels I had on her, she still had more points in strength than I did. I switched from trying to block the blows to just trying to redirect them.

Sakura froze with my hand on her wrist, even as she was busy cocking back her other hand for a follow-up strike.

"C-Carter?" Sakura said, face going pale. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. Perhaps that was exactly what she thought was happening.

"It's me," I said. "I'm back. I'm alive."

"How? I... Craig made me throw your corpse in the dumpster..." Sakura said, tears welling in her eyes.

“You didn’t think I’d really let Craig kill me, did you?” I gave her a cheeky grin. I held out my hands, hoping for an embrace like the one Myrina had given me. But none came.

Sakura’s eyes were wide and fearful.

“Look, I don’t have time to explain everything,” I said softly, holding up my hands, “though I promise I will. I need you to do something for me.”

Sakura’s eyes were distant, her brows furrowed and confused. She wasn’t sure if I was real or a figment of her imagination. “How can you be back?”

“Examine me,” I replied. “It will tell you who I am.”

I felt a tingle run up my spine as Sakura looked me over. “It says you’re Carter... but...”

I grabbed her hand, wrapping it up in my own. “I need you to take everyone who doesn’t deserve to die and get them outside. Can you do that?” I asked.

She looked at me in silence, then saw the seriousness in my expression. “I... I might. I don’t know if they’ll listen to me, though. Craig told everyone to ignore me and anything I said. Most fear to even talk to me...”

My face hardened. “Anyone who listens to Craig deserves to die. If they won’t listen to you, don’t worry about them.”

Sakura winced as she looked at me, pulling her hand back. “A-are you sure you’re my Carter?”

I grimaced. “I promise I’ll explain everything once this is over. But, please, just do as I asked. And make sure you get yourself out before the fires start.”

Her voice came out as timid as a mouse. That was nothing like the Sakura I knew. “Okay.”

I pulled my hood back up and turned. We parted ways, and I let the last traces of warmth welling up within me burrow deep into my core, far from sight. Such feelings weren’t appropriate for what I was about to do.

While Sakura headed for the other wing of the office, I went deeper into this one. This was the heart of Craig’s camp, where his most loyal followers rested from their battles—rested and recovered. Most of them were new faces, but I recognized a few who had abandoned Sakura and me in my moment of weakness to join Craig for the protection he could offer with his handgun.

Half of them were sleeping and helpless. Fighting monsters was tiring work, and they thought this was a safe place to rest. I waited a moment, wondering if I would have second thoughts. But my heart was as cold as stone.

One generator had been moved down from upstairs, presumably to give these privileged few the benefits of electricity. Though others put the work into getting the generators working, these were Craig’s elites and deserved all the luxuries this humble band of survivors could provide them.

That was about to come to an end.

I found the spare jugs of fuel. Some of them were proper gas cans, but most of the fuel was kept in janitorial buckets. They'd probably siphoned most of it from the nearby cars. I made a note of where they were for later. When doing so, something else caught my attention.

I spotted something familiar sitting beside one man resting by the wall in one of the side offices. There were three other men in the office with him, all rough-looking and unfamiliar. Two of the four were asleep, with the other two close to it.

The man by the wall I'd spotted had my survival sword propped up by his pillow. And now that I was looking, I was pretty sure he had my old boots on, too. The thief looked like he was ready to nod off at any moment. When I opened the door, I startled him awake.

"You have something that belongs to me," I said as I stood over him.

"Who the fuck do you--" the man started to say as he moved to stand up.

I stomped on his throat, caving in his windpipe. Then, foot pressed into his throat, I stooped over and picked up my sword.

"Hey, what are you--" the other man in the room began, but I shut him down by blasting him in the face with a Mana Bolt. His jaw shattered from the magical strike, and I followed it up with a slash of my newly recovered sword. The first man's eyes bulged as he realized he could no longer draw a breath. I put him out of his misery.

Finishing off the other two before they woke was even easier. Just like that, four more of Craig's men were finished before they could put up a fight.

Congratulations! You have advanced to human level 13.

Congratulations! You have advanced to Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 6.

Congratulations! You have reached a strength milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with a free Strength skill book or an upgrade to an existing skill:

- **Book of Surging Strength (Common) - Boosts strength by 20% for your next action.**
- **Book of Super Thrust (Common) - Shove forward an appendage with incredible force.**
- **Upgrade Power Jump (Common)... to Power Jump (Uncommon) - Power Jump's jump height increases, and cooldown decreases.**

I picked up Surging Strength, remembering how high Craig's strength stat was. I was spending my stats elsewhere, so I would probably still be lower than him. But Surging Strength might let me escape a grapple if I ever got caught.

Congratulations! You have reached a Willpower milestone!

Your title, **Blessed of the System**, awards you with a free **Willpower** skill book or an upgrade to an existing skill:

- **Book of Power of Nature (Common)** - Harness ambient mana, offsetting the mana costs of skills and spells depending on your surroundings.
- **Book of Upgrade Iron Will (Common)... to Iron Will (Uncommon)** - Pushes your stats beyond your natural limits, letting you temporarily run resources into the negatives for a recovery period afterward.

I picked up **Power of Nature**. I hadn't been putting as many points into intelligence as I was before. This seemed like a way to circumvent not constantly building up my mana pool. Instead, I could just use what was readily available to me.

I slipped into the next room and found two more sleeping men. Bloody sword in hand, I finished both of them off before they woke. They were both low level, so the gains were minimal.

The office next door had similar sleeping quarters, and I finished everyone there off as well. Craig's people were nothing more than levels in the making for me. A fourth such office brought another level for me.

Congratulations! You have advanced to human level 14.

Congratulations! You have advanced to Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 7.

I allocated my regular stats, pushing agility up to 20 for a new skill.

Congratulations! You have reached an Agility milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with a free Agility skill book or an upgrade to an existing skill:

- **Dash (Common) - Move with accelerated speed for a short time.**
- **Evolve Sure Step (Uncommon)... to Sure Step (Rare) - Sure Step suggestions become more accurate and activate more frequently. Sure Step's recommendations project ideal positioning further into the future.**

I ended up upgrading Sure Step to its Rare version. It had proven to be a versatile and useful skill, a trend that seemed like it would continue. Also, I was nearing the 15 skills cap that Myrina had warned me about for 'E' grade. I didn't want to pass that until I was close to level 25, where I would reach the next rank threshold. I still had several more skills to pick from, and I wanted to leave some of those skill slots open.

By now, nothing could hide what I was doing. Despite my best efforts to conceal my actions, I'd gotten blood all over my coat, and I was carrying a crimson-stained sword in my hand. After seeing me walk into four offices in a row, people were starting to pay attention, and I saw a few fingers pointed my way.

"Hey, you can't go in there!" someone shouted at me. "Someone get the gunners. I don't know what he's up to, but I don't like it."

I turned to the generator and the spare buckets of fuel I spotted earlier. With a pointed finger, I unleashed a Mana Bolt on them.

"May Lyra have mercy on your souls," I whispered. "Because you'll get none from me."

Fuel spread across the floor, soaking into the office carpet. I reached into my pocket for a book of matches. There had been plenty up for grabs in the survival kits I had been poking through recently.

I found one and swept it across the strip on the back. Once it lit, I tossed it toward the growing puddle of fuel. Some people ran from me the moment they saw me pull out the book of matches. When the flames took hold, anyone who wasn't already running for the exits before, was now. A few had their guns out, and one of them would have shot me if not for my Deflect spell—not that a single bullet would be enough to put me down with the vitality I had now.

The match ignited the fumes, and the entire room exploded in a sudden bright blast of flame. I stood off to one side as people opened fire at me. Me seeing them was difficult through all the smoke and flickering flames, but they were having even more trouble finding me than I was finding them.

I activated my new and improved Sure Step ability, and saw little dots appear on the ground. Instinctively, I knew these marked good places to stand. When I used them, bullets whizzed by, and the best armed of my opponents couldn't hit me through the smoke, debris, and roaring flames.

You have gained the Heat Resistance Proficiency!

That was when I started returning fire. I shot spell after spell with Mana Bolt, relying on my new ability, Power of Nature. I was used to my Mana Bolts using strictly neutral mana, but as soon as I activated Power of Nature, that changed. My spell still drew most of its power from me, but the final bit came from whatever mana it could gather around it.

Considering I was standing in the middle of a growing inferno, that meant Fire Mana.

My Mana Bolts became fireballs, each sticky and dripping with magically burning ichor and twice as big as the fireballs the Fire Squirrels shot. I struck a man holding a pistol in the hand, and every bullet left in his gun exploded all at once, blowing his hand clean off.

That was just the start of it, though. The fire crawled up his arm, and he fell to the ground, rolling in the puddle of burning liquid beneath him. He didn't even have time to scream as his skin burned to ash.

Congratulations! You have reached human level 15!

I felt strength surge through me again, though I didn't have the time to assign my four stat points. Craig's followers fled before me as the building burned around us, while I grew stronger with every person who died.

Mania has reached level 2: Furor.

All Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge abilities are enhanced by 40%.

A Scholar of Forbidden knowledge delves into the depths of chaos to unleash the secrets of the multiverse upon their enemies. But know that such powers come with a price. As your power grows, so too does the strain on your mind. Dig too deep and your sanity will shatter, leaving you an unrecognizable monster.

I lost track of time, then. Everything that came after was a haze of bullets, spells, and even hacking and slashing with my sword. It was bloody, violent, and absolutely without mercy. By now, anyone sleeping was either awake or as good as dead. The fighting turned fierce as I was shot at from all directions.

Even with Deflect, I was shot dozens of times. Finally, I turned on Mind over Flesh, using some of my mana and the power from the ambient environment to heal myself. The fire-tinged mana made me feel like there was lava in my veins instead of blood, but I ignored the pain as my body pushed out bullet after bullet.

“Run!” One man screamed. He was wearing a prison uniform, and I recognized him as one of the two-level 10s who had stood by Craig’s side when he’d killed me. With such a high level, he was bound to be worth a bunch of experience points, and I didn’t intend to let him slip away.

“Not so fast,” I said, shooting his legs out from under him with a Mana Bolt.

He collapsed, his knee shattered by my magic. He spun on his belly and pointed his handgun at me, firing two shots quickly. Deflect caught the first one. The second struck the underside of my chin. I spat out the lead when it stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“Oh god...” the man cried, a wet spot growing across the front of his pants, between his legs.

I activated Surging Strength and rammed my sword through his heart.

Congratulations! You have reached human level 16!

I stood over the body for a moment, listening for more gunshots. None came. Everyone else must have heeded my last victim's advice and fled. A pity, really, I'd been hoping to reach level 20.

I allocated all my available stat points. Some went into Charisma to push that over 20, with the rest going into luck, since I still needed my twenty attribute point skill from that ability. After I got that, I would be reliant on my class to give me any new skills I was hoping to get.

Congratulations! You have reached a Charisma milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with a free Charisma skill book or an upgrade to an existing skill:

- **If Looks Could Kill (Common) - Those who make eye contact with you are more likely to experience extreme fear.**
- **Gruesome Visage (Common) - Your face makes others feel as though they've seen a terrible monster, causing them to react accordingly.**
- **Upgrade Fabulous Phallus (Common) to Fabulous Phallus (Rare) - Increases the appeal and desire this skill engenders on those who experience it.**

If Looks Could Kill sounded like it would be situationally useful, but that wasn't the person I wanted to be. Gruesome Visage sounded more like a curse than an ability. I naturally upgraded Fabulous Phallus to its 'Rare' variant—not because I wanted to, but because I didn't want to waste a skill slot on either of the other two abilities.

I accepted the new ability and would have done more, if not for a message that flashed across my System screen.

Settlement Establishment Quest: Now Entering Bonus Round!

You have survived seven hours of monster attacks, but three challengers have presented themselves, all seeking to rule over this settlement. But only one may claim ownership of the Obelisk. Fight or drive away the other challengers to complete this quest!

“Wait, three challengers?” I muttered, suddenly curious. I didn’t have time to ponder it any further, though, because my Deflect spell triggered as a bullet flew my way, followed by several more. I took a shot to the shoulder but shrugged it off. It would heal in a minute or two. What was more important, was the man who fired that bullet.

“You!” Craig shouted as he stood down the hall near the entrance to the office.

23 “Who the hell do you think you are, coming in here and killing people who belong to me?” Craig

“Who the hell do you think you are, coming in here and killing people who belong to me?” Craig demanded.

Craig - Bandit Gunslinger (Level 16)

For a moment, I was about to tell Craig I'd come to avenge myself, but then I realized why Craig was asking. With my hood up, the blood over my face, and the admittedly impressive enhancements to my body all my stats had given me, Craig didn't recognize me. He thought I was someone who'd just shown up and decided to kill his people on a whim.

So I decided to answer him cryptically. “I'm the man who's going to kill you, Craig.”

I waited for him to ask how I knew his name, but he missed the prompt. I used the time to target him with my Share Curse ability and prepared my first Blood Sacrifice.

“Well, whoever the hell you are, you're dead now. Take this!” Craig opened fire with his handgun.

He'd already used my Deflect spell, so I had to dodge. I glanced at the ground, where a dozen glowing spots lit up on the floor as Sure Step told me the best places to position myself to avoid fire. I dove, rolled, and slid to one of them, giving Craig an odd angle

around a piece of debris.

I poked my arm around the corner and fired Mana Bolt. Craig's level was exactly the same as my own. This would be a tough fight, but I'd nearly beat him when he was several levels above me. Now that we were even, I planned to cut him to pieces.

"Ow!" Craig shouted when my spell punched him in the gut and lit his clothes on fire. The fire was eating at the walls now, and more fire mana than ever poured into my Mana Bolts.

Smoke filled the room, washing over it in great heaving waves. It gathered up toward the ceiling, and Craig's head seemed to disappear within the clouds. I kept low so I could breathe, but it looked like Craig just planned on holding his breath.

If we were ordinary humans, neither of us would be able to fight for long with the smoke, heat, and the office building crumbling around us. But our superhuman physiques meant we could shrug off danger that would leave regular humans gasping and succumbing to the flames in moments.

Craig shot his gun, and I fired a few more Mana Bolts. He was shooting with his left hand since he was still missing his trigger finger from our earlier fight. Between that and his hip shots, he shouldn't have been able to hit a thing, but his bullets proved strangely accurate.

"Oh, I get it. You're one of those magic wizard types," Craig said. "Stupid bullshit magic. I killed a guy like you earlier today. He was damn annoying."

"I bet it would suck to fight him again," I replied.

I could hear Craig's teeth grinding together from where I'd slid behind a barricade. He unloaded six shots into the spot I'd just spoken from, but I used the distraction to change positions and take him from surprise from behind. Using Power Jump, I could soar through the layer of smoke overhead and drop back down unseen.

Combined with Eldritch Augmentation—for brief moments—Power Jump let me maneuver with such speed that Craig couldn't track me. When used with Sure Step as well, I became a ghost. One moment I was on one side of the room, the next I was somewhere else entirely. I landed in a good spot to catch Craig with a few more Mana Bolts before diving for cover.

Fire crackled, and the wooden beams began to give under their own weight. The outside of the building was brick, but it all rested on beams of wood that were burning away with each passing moment. By some miracle, the fire alarms had survived the apocalypse, and now they were blaring loud and sharp.

The little plugs of wax in the sprinklers melted, unleashing their torrent of water onto the blaze. There was a lot of water in the pipes, and the sprinklers pumped it out as fast as they could—but this wasn't the kind of fire that could be extinguished so easily. Puddles of burning fuel sloshed around on the floor, dribbling everywhere. Water pooled on the floor, and the fuel just floated atop it, burning as hot as ever.

Some of the flames licked the sides of the generator. There was still a lot of fuel left in the tank. Until a moment ago, it had been running. I was getting a bad vibe from it now.

"There you are!" Craig shouted as he shot at me twice more. I could have returned fire, but Sure Step clearly indicated I should stay right where I was.

The generator exploded, and shrapnel flew everywhere. I ducked behind an office door torn off its hinges, and a shard of metal as large as my chest slammed into it, point first. Globbs of burning fuel sprayed everywhere, and for a moment, the heat grew even more intense.

I probably would have died if I'd been a little less lucky. Hell, it probably would have killed me if I hadn't hit Craig with Share Curse the moment I'd seen him.

Your Heat Resistance Proficiency has increased to 4

Your Caster Proficiency has increased to 7

You have gained the Fire Mana Proficiency!

I was getting tons of notifications as the fight wore on. None were more appreciated than indications my new heat resistance proficiency increased with every passing moment. Unfortunately, Craig's had probably been going up as well, which was bad news for my fireballs. But even if he could shrug off the fire, he couldn't shrug off the kinetic punch those fireballs carried with them.

I was shot twice more, each bullet burning my flesh as it lodged into me like a stubborn thorn. Something just felt wrong about them. With my current stats, getting hit with ordinary bullets felt no different from getting shot with a paintball gun—they packed a punch, but most of them didn't even break the skin.

Craig's bullets, however, were different. Each one carried the icy chill of a piece of metal in the dead of winter. A certain sense of maliciousness to them made a tingle run up my spine each time one *zipped* past. It was as though those bullets wanted to strike me. There were even a couple of shots that I was sure Craig had missed, yet the bullet

swerved in the air to hit me anyway.

I didn't know what unique abilities his Bandit Gunslinger class gave him, but whatever they were, they made him a scary opponent to face. He looked even scarier now that his skin was blistered from the flames around us and his eyes bloodshot from the smoke.

I was certain I looked much the same.

"Alright, that's it!" Craig shouted. Blood dripped from his nose and out the corners of his mouth from all the blows he'd taken. "I don't know who you are, but you made a mistake coming here! The last time I used this superpower, I killed lots of people. This time, I'm using it just for you."

The handgun in Craig's hand began to glow. A phantom image of a gun far larger and more powerful than the one he held in his hands took form. It was as wide around as Craig's chest, and it had a spinning ring of barrel whirring to life. The phantom image grew more solid, and Craig positioned his hands further down its length as the spectral minigun turned real.

I didn't even have time to yell 'Oh Crap' before he opened fire. Instead, I used Power Jump and Eldritch Augmentation to get out of the way.

Craig wasn't even really aiming the weapon. He just held down the trigger. A continuous stream of phantom bullets shot out in all directions, washing over the walls of the building. He spun, uncertain of where I'd hidden. He strafed over everything that could possibly be a hiding spot to compensate. Any table or door was shredded to pieces in a hail of phantom bullets. Every corner was peppered.

They didn't pack the same punch as real bullets. That was the only saving grace of Craig's skill. If he'd been using real bullets, that minigun of his would have burned through the shelter's entire ammunition stockpile by now. The fact that the System had an alternative to real ammunition was a lifeline for all of Craig's goons. They might be weakened when the ammo ran out, but would not become entirely irrelevant.

The walls themselves started crumbling as the hail of bullets eroded enough structural material to cause them to collapse. Before long, I heard great groaning creaks and groans as everything started to lean in our direction. The supports in our half of the building were completely gone, and now the weight of the other half was making itself known.

Bricks started raining from the walls, making nearly as much noise as they fell as Craig's hail of bullets. Everything was crumbling around me, and I held on for dear life.

"Huh, no notification..." Craig muttered as his minigun started fading in his hands. "Did he run? Hey, you bastard, are you still in here?"

Holding my breath, I clung to the ceiling in the one place he wouldn't look—concealed right above his head and hidden by the smoke. My fingers burned as I gripped the burning support beam, and hot embers crumbled every time I moved, but somehow I'd held on and survived Craig's relentless onslaught.

Now, it was time for one of my own.

I let go, twisting in the air as I fell on top of Craig's head with my survival sword extended point first. I used Surging Strength and Eldritch Augmentation to pour all of my power into the attack. My blade dug into Craig's collarbone and got stuck there—just like last time. Except that this time, I'd cut most of the way through the bone, instead of just nipping it.

“You bitch!” Craig yelled as he whipped around, ignoring the sword sticking out of his collarbone and whipping around.

He caught me by the throat, and I realized this was exactly the situation I’d been in last time. But this time, the result would be very different. “I’m going to kill you!” Craig snarled as he squeezed.

I breathed fire into his eyes.

It turned out I could cast Mana Bolt from anywhere, not just my hands. When I thought about it coming from my mouth, it did just that. Up so close and enhanced with fire as my Mana Bolt was, they came out looking more like fireballs than bursts of magic.

I kept up a continuous stream of flames as I twisted, my legs going horizontal between me and his chest. Using Power Jump, I broke his grip while pulling the point of my sword deeper into him by the grip I had of its hilt.

Craig cried out in pain as I rolled to my feet, nearly slipping in the burning fuel. My hood caught fire and started burning, so I grabbed my entire jacket and tossed it aside.

“Recognize me now, Craig?” I asked, as I splayed my hands out wide.

Craig’s eyes widened. “You?! But how? Impossible! You’re dead!”

“Not anymore.”

“Are you some sort of ghost? Sworn to haunt me until I put you out of your misery once and for all?” Craig asked.

I laughed. “No. I’m as flesh and blood as you are.”

Craig’s jaw tightened. “Apparently, I should have torn your corpse apart. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“You won’t get the chance.”

Our exchange of threats bought me enough time for Surging Strength to recharge for another use, so that when Craig rushed me, I was ready.

He used the arm on his unwounded side to try for a grapple. It had to be instinctual for a man as big and strong as he was. Even wounded, he had at least a foot of height and a hundred pounds of muscle on me. But he didn’t have as many strength points on me as he thought he did—especially not when I activated my new skill.

Surging Strength brought my effective strength stat to just over 26, which was still a bit lower than whatever Craig had, but enough to throw off his grapple when I had two good arms, and he only had one. With my sword still stuck in his collarbone, his other arm hung limply at his side.

When his hand went to my throat, my hand went to his fingers. I twisted them back until the bones *snapped*, and Craig cried out in pain.

The building shook in reply, and the ceiling just to our left collapsed. A steel I-beam as thick as my body fell from above and slammed into the ground where I'd been standing a moment ago. I'd followed Sure Step's guidance, though, and moved aside bare moments before.

Craig, on the other hand, hadn't been so lucky.

I wasn't sure if it was my Share Curse ability I'd hit him with at the beginning of the fight, or just plain old bad luck, but the falling beam struck him in the head, slamming him to the ground. I half expected his brains to splash out of his shattered skull like a busted watermelon, but he was made of sterner stuff than that.

Groaning, he struggled to shove the beam up and away with his broken fingers. His power was enough to shove the beam off of him with one mighty heave, once he got a decent grip on it.

I grabbed the sword buried in his collarbone and tugged it free a moment before he rolled out from under the steel beam.

Craig screamed in pain, reaching for his gun but unable to use it with broken fingers on one hand and a disabled arm on the other. He was helpless before me, and I watched the fear dawn in his eyes as he realized his predicament.

Craig spoke his last words. "Fuck you, cocksucker!"

I stabbed the sword through his eye, piercing into his brain. Even that didn't put Craig down, but I followed the attack up by activating Corrupting Mark. Throughout the entire fight I'd been hitting him with the spell again and again. They did little against his massive health pool, but by now he had more stacks of the curse on him than anyone

I'd fought against since obtaining the ability.

When I snapped my fingers, all of those marks exploded outward. Craig's flesh rippled as a shadowy tentacled being tore itself free from his body. Craig shook, quivered, and died.

"You're shit at dying," I said, giving his body a kick as I waited for the notification. "I was expecting something clever to finally come out of your mouth for your last words—but I guess that was too much to hope for."

You have slain Craig - Bandit Gunslinger (Level 16)

Congratulations! You have reached human level 17!

Congratulations! You have reached Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 10!

Quest Complete!

You have completed the quest: Vengeance of the Fallen! - You have avenged Benjamin and all those unjustly slain by Craig's machinations. Their spirits can rest easier, knowing that you kept your word. You have fulfilled your half of the bargain, increasing your reputation and the weight of your word in all future encounters with other humans, both living and dead.

+100 Renown.

You have been awarded the title: Oathkeeper.

+10 stat points in any stat.

I was surprised to get another 10 skill points, but I knew just where to spend them. I had another quest awaiting completion, and these ten points could be assigned right where I needed them.

Your luck stat has reached 20!

You have completed the Stat Quest: Luck Unleashed!

You now have full access to the hidden stat: Luck

Congratulations! Less than 3% of users unlock the hidden stat Luck.

The Luck stat is innate to every being of the Arcadia Multiverse, and though most are unaware of it, it is capable of warning you of danger or assisting you in finding treasure. Leveling luck is considered extremely difficult, as ordinary stat points cannot be allocated to increase Luck. But as difficult as it is, many across the multiverse seek its elusive rewards. By gaining access to your Luck stat, you can now count yourself among a rare, lucky few.

Effects: All effects of your luck stat are doubled and can be consciously felt.

+5 Luck for completing Luck Unleashed.

The sudden boost in Luck came with compounded rewards as my title came into play.

Congratulations on reaching a Luck milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with a Luck skill book or an upgrade to an existing skill:

- **Book of the Blind Marksman (Common) - Increases odds of hitting targets when firing randomly.**
- **Book of the Impregnator (Common) - Increases the probability of pregnancy after sex.**
- **Upgrade Share Curse (Uncommon)... to Share Curse (Rare) - Share Curse's effectiveness increases, transferring 75% of its negative effects to a designated opponent.**

I upgraded Share Curse. Having so much negative luck unnerved me, so I wanted the ability to shove most of it aside. Maybe I could get to the point where I had enough points in luck, that the curse wouldn't matter at all—at least while I had Share Curse activated.

I'd probably have to find a rat or something and carry it around in my pocket to keep cursing it. That might mitigate some of the effects of the constant monster attacks, though I doubted the curse would linger while I ran off to do other things. That was something that would bear testing.

Congratulations on reaching an Insight milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with an Insight skill book!

- **Anticipate (Rare): Peer into the near future to anticipate an enemy's attack or action, granting you a chance to react and counter effectively.**
- **Psychic Persuasion (Rare): Utilize your knowledge of the minds of others to manipulate their thoughts and actions, allowing you to control them for a short period or to exploit their weaknesses.**
- **Exploit Weakness (Rare): Analyze an enemy to identify their vulnerabilities, allowing you and your allies to deal increased damage and bypass their defenses.**

Insight was my specialty combination mental stat, and it showed in the choices the system gave me now. I'd bolstered my survivability recently, and now what I was looking for was additional damage.

Anticipate seemed like it could be powerful if leveraged correctly, and if I had more abilities, I would be inclined to take it. But as it was, I was still building my arsenal of mundane and magical weapons.

The same argument could be made of Psychic Persuasion. In the hands of a suave social manipulator, it might be the deadliest ability anyone could possess. But all these offensive abilities were more terrifying to me than tempting. I had no illusions about my ability to manipulate my way to greatness. In a world of mind controllers, I was more worried about being mind controlled than the temptation to be the controller.

With those thoughts in mind, I went for the much more straightforward ability Exploit Weakness. As a rare ability, it would instantly be a cornerstone of my arsenal and allow me to deal damage that otherwise wouldn't have been possible. Besides, who didn't like

dealing critical hits?

Congratulations on reaching an Aberration milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with an Aberration skill book!

- **Warp Step (Rare): Bend space and reality to instantly move to a nearby location, evading physical attacks and leaving disoriented enemies in your wake.**
- **Maddening Gaze (Rare): Lock eyes with an enemy, inflicting them with temporary insanity, causing confusion and erratic behavior.**
- **Unnatural Resilience (Rare): Your body, twisted by the forces of the Aberration, has developed a resistance to mundane and magical damage, reducing the overall harm inflicted upon you.**

Maddening Gaze seemed like a good way to scare off anyone wanting to look at me. While I made no claims of having the most handsome face in the world, I didn't like the idea of people fearing to even look at me. What would happen if I had such an ability and couldn't control it? Would I have to wear a mask everywhere for fear of driving my loved ones mad? Would anyone be able to take the chuunibyo in their midst seriously?

Nope, no Maddening Gaze. No mask. No teenage edgelord fantasies, thank you very much.

Unnatural Resilience was tempting as a generic passive physical enhancement ability, but I wanted something a little more directly useful for the timed being. One thing I learned from games was that mobility in a fight was more useful than any stat in skilled hands. So I picked Warp Step

Congratulations on reaching an Arcana milestone!

Your title, Blessed of the System, awards you with an Arcana skill book!

- **Spell Echo (Rare):** When casting a spell, you have a chance to create an echo of the spell, causing it to be cast again for free shortly after the initial casting.
- **Runic Barrier (Rare):** Draw a powerful, protective rune in the air, shielding you or an ally from harm. The shield's strength and duration are based on your Arcana stat.
- **Eldritch Blast (Rare):** Unleash a torrent of dark, magical energy towards your foes, dealing immense damage and potentially corrupting their essence.

The Arcana stat was something I expected big things from, just from the name. This was the stat of magic and spellcraft I flicked through my options quickly, realizing how long I'd been standing there. Though the System screens seemed almost supernatural with the speed at which their information entered my mind, smoke was still filling the room, and standing in a burning building as I was much longer wouldn't be smart, no matter what was waiting for me outside

Runic Barrier didn't quite fit with the offensive mindset I was leaning toward. Ultimately I went with Eldritch Blast. Mana Bolt had served me well, but it periodically went on cooldown and I needed another ability to throw at my enemies. I chose Eldritch Blast.

The building started crumbling around me, reminding me that the whole thing was probably going to come tumbling down soon. Figuring out how best to work with all these new skills would have to wait until I wasn't standing in the middle of a burning office. It was time to get out of here.

I'd been holding my breath for the last minute of the fight, because even crouched low, the smoke was thick enough to leave me gagging. Now, my lungs were starting to burn, and I dropped to the ground to get a breath and a clear view of the office as I made my way to the door.

My body ached from the fight. I'd pushed myself hard and taken more gunshots than I liked. But I already had Mind Over Flesh active, so my regeneration was already pushing those bullets out of me and patching me up. It would probably be at least an hour before I was at full strength, though.

I emerged and stood, my charred clothes little more than strips of cloth hanging onto me—but I wore a grin on my face. Craig was dead. Ben and all the others had been avenged. Victory was mine at last.

There was only one thing that could make it better.

“C-Carter?” Sakura stuttered, eyes wide as she watched me climb to my feet.

“You weren't crazy, Sakura! It really is him!” Bridget said from beside her.

Around them stood a bunch of other people, some of whom I recognized from Ben's group or from the office before that. This must have been everyone who listened to Sakura when she'd told them to get out of the building while they still could.

“It's me,” I assured them both.

Sakura looked hesitant, but Bridget immediately wrapped her arms around me. “I'm so

glad you aren't dead! I heard from the others that they threw your body away..."

That explained why Bridget was quicker to accept my revival than Sakura. She hadn't seen my body. Sakura had held my corpse in her own hands.

"I did die, and they did throw my body away," I explained. "But I'm back now. I talked to Ben and the others who died, as well. They helped me come back to avenge them and put down Craig once and for all."

They each gave me a quizzical look, and I gave them a short summary of what had transpired after my death.

"The afterlife is an old, run-down arcade?" Sakura asked skeptically.

"You're just going to have to trust me on that one." I chuckled.

Sakura's face flushed, and she wrung her hands together. "... I do..." Then, like Bridget, she wrapped her arms tight around me.

Face buried in my chest, she mumbled. "I'm still not sure if you're my Carter, but you smell like him."

"Like smoke, blood, and sweat?" I snickered.

I held Sakura tight. "Tell me what I can do to prove to you that I'm still me."

She bit her lip, staring up into my eyes. “What were the plans we made back in my office, right before all this started?”

“You mentioned you needed someone to keep you company at one of your father’s corporate events and invited me along,” I replied.

Sakura smiled. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Bridget’s eyes widened. “Y-you guys were planning a date?” Her lips twisted into a pout.

Sakura snuggled a little closer into my chest. “That’s right, we were.”

“Well...” I trailed off. I hadn’t thought of it as a date at the time, just helping my boss and friend out... outside of office hours. But I supposed to outsiders, it would seem like a date. “Yeah... I guess we were.”

“It’s good to have you back,” Sakura said, eyes staring up into mine. “When I thought you were dead, I prayed for a second chance and promised I would do things right if I could have a second chance. I plan to do just that.”

I ran my fingers through her hair. “We have a lot to talk about,” I agreed. I needed to tell Sakura everything—not just about dying and coming back to life, but about before then. About Myrina and the Amazonian Empire.

But before I could go into any of it, some more familiar figures emerged.

“Carter, are you a zombie?” Frank asked.

Marcus hid behind Frank, his eyes wide and fearful.

I chuckled. “No, I’m not a zombie, Frank.”

“Good enough for me. You guys can put the guns down.” Frank gestured to the people behind him. I recognized some of them from having worked with them to guard our sector back during the early stages of the settlement quest. I waved to those I knew.

“Sir, it’s good to have you back,” Marcus said, finally stepping out of Frank’s shadow.

“It’s good to be back, Marcus,” I replied. “Now, I’m betting Craig still had a lot of goons fending off monsters besides just you guys. Where are they, now that the quest is over?”

“They started running a few minutes ago—as soon as they got word of a fire. After that, they got a notification that Craig had died, and there was a bit of infighting. Most of the survivors headed around the corner there,” Frank explained, pointing. “But there’s one more thing. The quest isn’t over.”

I checked the prompt and realized Frank was right.

Settlement Establishment Quest: Now Entering Bonus Round!

1/2 challengers defeated... drive off or slay the remaining challenger to lay claim to the Settlement Obelisk!

The dead challenger had to be Craig, but who was the other one? As though in answer to my question, a roar echoed from the far side of the building.

24 We followed the roar and soon found what was left of Craig's remaining people.

We followed the roar and soon found what was left of Craig's remaining people. They'd broken and scattered, but the bulk of them had gathered here—gathered and then had promptly been slaughtered. And the culprit was still munching on their corpses.

It took me a moment to recognize her.

Her fur was the black of a starless night, and her eyes were like burning coals. Her claws were as long as daggers, and her teeth were deep yellow. The way her feral lips pulled back in a snarl made her look eager to see me in a deadly and predatory way. Her body was the size of a car, lined with scars and with one faint line along her side from a makeshift spear. I recognized the old wound, which looked like it had happened years ago now. This was the very rat I'd fought twice before.

Rat Matriarch - Level 20

First, I'd nearly killed her, then she'd nearly killed me. It looked like this time she intended to finish things between us once and for all.

"Behind me!" I shouted, and no sooner had I spoken did she open her mouth and spray forth a toxic green mist that washed over the area.

Off to my side, Marcus turned green and fell to his knees. A few others soon followed suit, especially those with lower levels.

The moment I saw her, I knew this was the challenger the quest spoke of. But I doubted she'd come for the settlement quest. No, somewhere in her beastly brain was a desire for vengeance. She came for me.

I held my breath, but the foul stench was so potent it forced its way up my nose. Decaying corpses had nothing on the Rat Matriarch's breath—and I would know.

I coughed uncontrollably, and I heard others do the same behind me. Only a handful held it together, while most of our group collapsed to the ground to splutter and gag until it sounded like they were about to cough up their lungs.

The massive rat charged forward, slashing with razor sharp fangs. She was fast—faster than I'd expected. Even with my enhanced reflexes, I barely managed to dodge her attack. I used Power Jump to get clear and position myself so I could rain down spells on her.

Finger pointed, I fired Mana Bolt directly at the Rat Matriarch. I expected it to do little damage, but I hoped I might be able to slow her down a bit. The bolt struck home, and the Rat Matriarch flinched, but it didn't slow her at all. It was obvious she was resistant to damage. The blast merely pissed her off that much more. She closed the distance between us in a flash.

It was going to take something special if I intended to defeat her. First, I activated Exploit Weakness. The world around me turned black except for a few hazy outlines. Those outlines were annotated and marked, each clearly labeled.

Marcus turned, and Exploit Weakness drew a target over his eyes, mouth, and the weakest parts of his skull.

I shifted my attention to the Rat Matriarch, and in this strange distorted vision, it highlighted her throat, underbelly, and face.

I targeted the latter with my new ability, Eldrich Blast.

Like Mana Bolt, Eldrich Blast shot out a burst of magical energy. A dark wave of energy erupted from my hand, moving more like a gust of wind than the condensed points of light that were mana bolt. It washed over the Rat Matriarch like a wave, and her fur blacked under its touch.

Though there were no visible wounds, the Rat Matriarch shrieked in pain and I reckoned I'd done some damage.

As soon as I finished casting my spell, I dove to my right, avoiding the charging Rat Matriarch headed my way. Unfortunately, that gave her a chance to turn and slash at me. Her claws tore through my shirt, leaving gaping holes where they passed. She would have gutted me then and there if I hadn't used Warp Step.

Time seemed to slow for a fraction of a second, and I focused on an area a few paces away. Sure Step guided me as well, and in one quick leap I found myself carried six paces away. It was like the world had twisted and folded beneath me so that my one step would carry me a distance that should have taken several.

I would have taken longer to marvel at my new powers, but already I could hear the others screaming as they were overwhelmed.

"Carter!" Sakura yelled. She was still focused on the ground beneath the Rat Matriarch,

unaware that I had already slipped away unharmed.

“Provide cover fire!” Marcus yelled.

“Let me take her,” I said. Eyes whipped in my direction, shocked to find me behind them all of a sudden. Sakura especially seemed startled and caught herself just as she was about to charge the Rat Matriarch with her club in hand.

Marcus was about to protest, but I shook my head.

My companions would soon have problems of their own. For just like last time, the Rat Matriarch hadn't come alone. Red eyes lined the darkness of the streets, filling the alleys for as far as I could see.

Most were tiny, no larger than normal rats. But many others were bigger, ranging from the size of cats to the size of large dogs. The Rat Matriarch was the only one who'd achieved her truly colossal size, but the sheer number of feral creatures surrounding us was terrifying to behold.

The Rat Matriarch screeched, and the call carried through the rat hoard, repeated until all heard it. Like a vast army, the rats answered her cry. They charged forward as one, as they heeded their matriarch's call. The rats weren't nearly as strong as her, but they were fast and could move quickly, despite being small.

They swarmed over me as I tried desperately to keep them off of me while dodging her powerful blows. Eldrich Blast was too slow to catch them, but a single blast with Mana Bolt was enough to put any of them down. But every Mana Bolt I wasted dealing with them was one I couldn't fire at the Rat Matriarch.

One of them latched itself onto my leg and began chewing frantically. Its teeth dug deep, drawing blood with its little jaws. A large rat grabbed me by the neck and attempted to pull me toward its mother. But I threw it off with both hands and kicked it aside, sending it flying past the Rat Matriarch.

I wished for my sword, but that battered and bent piece of steel was still stuck in the shoulder of Craig's corpse as the building burned down around it. I would have to make do with my feet and fists.

Power Jump helped me stay nimble and out of the way while blasting any of the larger rats that came close enough to become a problem. I lashed out with Corrupting Mark wherever I could. I would have liked to use Blood Sacrifice, but my health still hadn't fully recovered and I was worried about it dipping too low.

Of course, I wasn't the only one fighting the rats. Sakura, Bridget, Frank, Marcus, and many others were behind me—all of them busy fighting their own foes. Most were targeting the rats with their guns, but Bridget and Sakura, in particular, were taking care of the ones attacking us with melee weapons. They were the only thing keeping the rats from attacking those dependent on their guns to fight. If either of them failed, our line would crumble. That was probably what had happened to all the bodies around us.

My comrades were only barely keeping pace with the Rat Matriarch's army, and I could see a few eyes darting around in terror each time the Rat Matriarch lunged forward.

"There are too many of them! Run!" A woman armed with a rifle gasped, wide-eyed with terror.

"They got me! I'm bleeding! Help!" a man yelled as he clutched at his throat. A rat was biting him there, hanging on by its teeth as he tried to pull it free.

“Hold!” I shouted in reply. I cast one spare Mana Bolt to put the rat attacking the man out of its misery. He probably would have been able to kill it himself, if he wasn’t so panicked. “If you flee, they’ll just chase you down and kill you even easier!”

The few who looked like they were about to bolt hesitated at my words. When nobody else fled, they calmed and hefted their guns. They kept fighting, though terror threatened to overwhelm what little courage they had left.

I had to win my fight against the Rat Matriarch. I had a feeling that the moment I did so, the rest of the rats would scatter. But she was both fast and strong, like her kin, only to an exponentially greater extent. Worse, my mana was still half depleted from my fight with Craig, and the few minutes I’d had since facing him were far from enough to recover from my wounds.

I had been using Mind Over Flesh to consume mana and regenerate with the utmost speed, but I had to cut that steady stream of mana off. I wasn’t sure how long this fight would last, and I’d likely need that mana to cast offensive spells.

My next Mana Bolt landed on top of the Rat Matriarch’s head, exploding with searing flames. The scent of burning fur filled the air, and the Rat Matriarch howled. She whipped around wildly, trying to shake the flame off, but couldn’t.

When Marcus finished off the last of the smaller rodents coming towards him, he aimed his gun at the Rat Matriarch’s torso. He pulled the trigger, and the *crack* of his gunshot echoed down the street. But he had yet to learn the lesson I already had—ordinary bullets became increasingly ineffective, the more points in vitality something had.

His bullet hit the Rat Matriarch square in the snout, but the bullet bounced off, doing

nothing except to make her angry. In response, she lashed out at Marcus, smashing him against the nearby wall, hard. His body armor cracked, and he stumbled forwards, bleeding profusely from the wound.

Frank ran to help Marcus, but the Rat Matriarch launched herself at him, too. He dove out of the way, barely avoiding being crushed beneath her weight. Then she swiped at him again with her claws. Again, he evaded death by inches.

This time, though, he was slower to dodge and took a wound along his back from those long, sharp nails. Blood flowed from the gash, and he dropped his rifle before falling flat on his stomach. He scrambled to grab it as the Rat Matriarch stomped towards him, intent on tearing into him with her huge paws. But I wasn't about to let the beast kill my comrade in front of me.

I jumped forward, grabbing the barrel of his weapon as it slid across the ground toward me. My fingers wrapped around the barrel as I twisted. Using Frank's rifle like a club, I bashed the Rat Matriarch in the head. The impact drove her back slightly, but she recovered almost immediately. That was enough for Frank to recover and crawl out of the path of danger, though.

She whirled on me, and my eyes met hers, our gazes carrying deadly intent. A silent message passed between us. This would be the last time we fought. Only one of us would walk away alive when all was said and done here.

I cast Mana Bolt and swung the rifle around in my hands to use it normally, getting one good shot off before the Rat Matriarch was on top of me. I had to use Power Jump to escape her grasp.

The Rat Matriarch looked like she wanted to pursue me, but someone else joined the fray. Bridget lunged forward from our defensive line while Sakura took a step back,

furiously fiddling with her stat menu. It looked like Sakura had leveled up and was allocating her stat points as quickly as possible.

Bridget was only level 7, but what she lacked in power she made up for with a furious war cry and the table leg in her hands. It was the same one I'd given her earlier that day when the integration began. She whipped it over her head, smashing it into the Rat Matriarch's exposed rear.

"Come here, you big, ugly rodent!" Bridget taunted the creature. Her blows didn't do any actual damage, but they succeeded in doing what I was pretty sure she'd been aiming for. She drew the beast's attention.

"Bridget, get back!" I yelled. She didn't have the stats to help me against a monster as powerful as this. With its speed and strength, it could end her life in a flash.

Even as I yelled, I realized Bridget knew exactly what she was doing. And she was prepared to risk her life anyway—all just to give me another opening. Not even I could jump between her and the Rat Matriarch fast enough to protect her. The only way to save her now, would be to draw the Rat Matriarch's attention away again, just like Bridget had done.

So I unleashed Mana Bolt after Mana Bolt on the Rat Matriarch's exposed haunches. It growled at Bridget, snapping at her with her teeth and claws as it tried to catch her. But Bridget slipped away twice in quick succession.

The Rat Matriarch paid a heavy price, letting herself get distracted in a fight against me. I fired a dozen Mana Bolts at her as quickly as I could. As close as I was, every one of them struck home, and within moments her smoldering fur had become a bonfire as my fire-laced Mana Bolts took hold and nipped away at her skin. Soon, her hide looked much like my body did at the moment—burned and blistered all over.

“Hey, pick on someone your own level!” I shouted at the Rat Matriarch.

I sensed Bridget was slowing. That last attack had nearly disemboweled her. She just wasn't fast enough or strong enough to play the sort of game she had been playing with this monster—not for long.

But I was. Now that Bridget had helped me level the playing field between us, I was more confident than ever in my ability to put her down. But instead of facing me, the Rat Matriarch turned to Bridget once again. Unlike before, Bridget was just a hair too slow this time.

The Rat Matriarch Bit her hand, and Bridget's eyes widened in a silent scream.

I had to dig deeper. The power I wielded wasn't enough. I needed more. And as I had that thought, the power came.

Mania has reached level 3: Blood Frenzy.

Chaos fills your soul, and your grip on sanity grows dangerously tenuous.

All Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge skills are enhanced by 80%

I was on top of the Rat Matriarch then, rifle barrel in one hand and Mana Bolt in the other. A cackle escaped my lips, a vicious snarl adorning my face, as I cast Blood Sacrifice. True to my current bonus, the ability took a far heftier chunk of the Rat Matriarch's health than it cost me. One Corrupting Mark after another hit the Rat

Matriarch, and the drain to her health increased dramatically.

I clubbed her in the side of the head repeatedly as I blasted her with Mana Bolt after Mana Bolt, finally taking out one eye and blinding the Rat Matriarch on that side.

She couldn't get to me with her claws, so she tried with her maw. To do that, though, she had to release Bridget—who flopped to the ground with a limp *thud*. The Rat Matriarch arched her spine as she tried to bite me, but only got a smack in the snout for her trouble.

Then, she rolled. I wasn't prepared for that, and her crushing weight was suddenly on top of me. She twisted, and my worst fears came true. I was stuck in a grapple with an opponent far stronger than I was. Worse, this one had sharp teeth and a poisonous bite.

I shoved the rifle into her mouth, and her teeth cracked on the wood and steel. I sensed a foul stench emanating from her mouth as she breathed toxins on me again, but that helped me remember that I had my own breath weapon.

Fire met poison as we struggled once more. She was stronger than I was, but with my Surging Strength skill, I could almost match her—for the moment. But the lesser rats were coming closer, and I felt them eying my vulnerable throat hungrily.

Time slowed as I raced through my options in my head. I was feeling the effects of mania to their fullest, now. The edges of my vision had turned red, and I knew something was wrong. But I needed the boost to power—I would die and die quickly without it. I just had to focus and keep the negative effects from killing me first.

I'd already targeted the Rat Matriarch with my new curse. I hadn't tested out Eldritch Blast, and worried that it might drain what was left of my mana. But it was my best

offensive weapon since I couldn't use Disassemble—not while she had so much fight left in her. I could escape, but I would take some heavy wounds, especially from those other rats coming toward me.

I had to do something. Worried at what would happen, I cast Eldritch Blast into the Rat Matriarch's face. She shrieked and stumbled back from me, shaking her head and twitching violently. I hardly heard it, though, as a wave of dizziness from mana exhaustion threatened to overwhelm me.

Just then, a scream echoed down the street, barely recognizable in the depth of its ferocious fury. I struggled to focus as I used Iron Will. But then I did recognize it... that was Sakura's voice.

"Die!" she yelled as she landed on top of the Rat Matriarch's back. She had her bat in hand, battered and bruised from ages of use, but with crimson light lining its length as she reinforced it, she brought it down on top of the Rat Matriarch's head repeatedly.

Each blow sent a rumble running up and down the street, and the ground shuddered like the earth was quaking. But that wasn't the first thing I noticed.

Sakura had a horn.

A single red protrusion stuck out of the middle of her forehead, hair streaking out behind her. Her entire body shimmered with raw, uncontained physical might, and a dangerous aura filled the air around her.

Again and again, she brought her bat down on the Rat Matriarch's head, and as she did, I blasted it from below. I fired Mana Bolt again and again into its maw, pinned open with the rifle.

It howled in pain, and I shoved my boot into its stomach and used Power Jump to shove myself free. That was when I got a good look at Sakura. She was taller than before. Whatever had given her that horn took her from a petite thing to a woman just a bit smaller than Craig had been. The Rat Matriarch beneath her was still larger, but as she beat the beast with her club, it struggled to throw her off.

How many stat points did Sakura have in strength? To hit that hard, it had to be many more than I did. Her level had also increased, and her name flashed differently for a moment.

Sakura Miyamoto - Oni Berserker (Level 10)

I wasn't about to waste this opportunity Sakura had bought me, though. I attacked while the Rat Matriarch struggled to deal with her, even as the monster recovered from the stunning effect of my Eldritch Blast. Between the two of us, the Rat Matriarch was getting overwhelmed.

The beast turned on Sakura, snapping at her legs to even the odds.

But Sakura dodged and then slammed her bat straight into the side of the Rat Matriarch's skull. I heard bone *crack*, and the Rat Matriarch stumbled to the side, looking dazed.

This was my moment. I summoned all my remaining mana and cast Disassemble while calling on all my stacked instances of Corrupting Mark.

My mana washed over the Rat Matriarch as shadow tendrils writhed within her, and

though she had the raw reserves of power to resist my ability, she didn't have enough wits about her to do so, stunned as she was by Sakura fracturing her skull.

My mana overwhelmed the Rat Matriarch's, flooding her entire body. Then, my mana pulled. The Rat Matriarch exploded in a fountain of blood and guts. The pieces flew up into the air, before falling back down in neat and well-organized piles.

You have slain the Rat Matriarch!

You have reached human level 20.

You have reached Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge level 13.

You have earned the title Giantslayer (Rare) - For defeating a foe significantly above you in level, you have earned the title Giantslayer. No enemy, no matter how lofty their level, is beyond your reach.

+5 to all racial stats.

I stood there over the organized piles of meat, bone, hide and entrails that had been the Rat Matriarch, chest heaving. Red light shone on the ground, and I moved to attack the light until I realized it followed my gaze. My eyes were glowing red.

I still wanted to attack. The Rat Matriarch was dead and the battle was won, but my mania cried out for more blood—the System didn't call Mania level 3 'Blood Frenzy' for no reason. But now wasn't the time for that.

I focused and through a tremendous effort of will, I got myself to relax.

Mania Level reduced to level 2: Furor

That calmed me enough to remember why I'd been fighting. "Bridget!" I yelled, rushing to the fallen intern.

She lay in a limp pile on the ground, a sheen of fever sweat covering her forehead as her eyes hung half-lidded.

Marcus ran up to me. "I have a first aid kit! It's right around the corner."

"Go get it!"

Marcus ran as I inspected and cleaned the wound. He was back in a flash, handing me a familiar red box. I flipped it open, searching for the antibiotic ointment. From the looks of things, Bridget was afflicted with the same toxin the Rat Matriarch had hit me with: Toxic Bite.

Only now, with how much stronger the monster had been, her poison was stronger, too. The level difference between Bridget and the Rat Matriarch was far larger than the level difference between she and I when I'd first been bit. This would be a close one, but I hoped Bridget would be okay if I could get rid of the toxic affliction quickly enough.

"Bridget, this is important. I need you to share your status screen with me," I said.

Her bleary eyes shook, and her hand trembled a moment before a screen popped up before my eyes.

You are afflicted with [Toxic Bite]!

You have received damage.

You are afflicted with [Paralysis]!

Sure enough, Bridget's health was steadily ticking downward. But there was something I could do about that. I used the antibiotics on her, and the notifications started coming less frequently.

"If you have any spare points," I told Bridget, "dump them into Vitality."

It turned out Bridget did have a few spare points. The last fight had given her two levels, and she dumped all eight points into vitality. That, at least, helped stabilize her to where she wouldn't be in immediate danger of dying. Hopefully, a few more applications of the antibiotic ointment would heal her—just like it had healed me.

"I'll bring her somewhere to lie down," Frank offered. "We cleared out a little space in one of the nearby offices. Marcus and I were talking about setting up camp there after running away from Craig's crew."

I hesitated a moment, not wanting to let Bridget out of my arms. She'd gotten that bite helping me, after all.

“You’re in no condition to be playing medic. You look half dead yourself,” Frank murmured.

He leaned in and whispered to me. “And half the men are already convinced you’re a zombie, since so many saw you die before. If I let you take her away, they’ll think you’re going to bite her and turn her into an undead like you.”

I chuckled. “Point taken, Frank. I’ll check in on her when I’ve healed up. Remember to apply this antibiotic ointment every ten minutes or so.”

Frank nodded, scooped Bridget up, and started to walk away—heading back in the direction we’d come from.

“Wait, Frank,” I called out to him. “I know a better place. I’ve got a bunch of survival gear, supplies, and even a tent and some sleeping bags.”

His eyebrows rose at the mention of supplies. I turned to get my bearings. Crownhill looked so different now, it took me a moment. But my eyes pierced the night shadows with ease, and I saw the shop I’d taken shelter in with Myrina.

I pointed it out to Frank. “The gear and stuff is on the lower floor. It’s a good defensible position to set up a more permanent camp now that the office is destroyed. See if you can get Marcus and anybody else you can trust to set up shop there.”

“What about the monsters roaming the streets?” Frank asked.

I turned to the empty alleys around us. “You won’t have to worry about them much longer. At this point, I think I’m the scariest monster roaming this city.”

I turned back to take in the scene of the dead Rat Matriarch corpse—or what was left of her. The bits and pieces pulled out of her by my Disassemble skill were scattered in neat little piles over the battlefield. The last of the rats had gone, scurrying off to whatever burrow they’d come from in the first place.

Sakura sat in the middle of all the carnage, sitting with her hands on her knees and blood covering her arms and legs. Her face, though, was remarkably clear of guts and debris. She panted and shuddered as the furious light faded from her eyes. When it finally went out, she sagged in place.

But the horn jutting out of her forehead remained, as plain as day.

“Sakura, are you okay?” I asked.

She looked up at me and gave me a bloody smile. She probably had a few internal injuries. “Did I do good, Carter?”

“Wonderful!” I hauled her to her feet.

She’d shrunk down a bit after whatever ability she’d used earlier had ended, but she was noticeably taller than before. New, firm and toned muscles lined her frame as well. They widened her hips and shoulders, causing her clothes to split at the seams. She didn’t resemble the office worker I knew at all anymore. Now, she looked more like an Olympic athlete at the peak of her training.

“Good, I’m glad.” She smiled at me, her eyes meeting mine.

Something special passed between us, and I felt a sudden urge to kiss her come over me. I moved my lips a little closer, eyes locked on her lips. Sakura seemed to know what was happening and closed her eyes with a blissful smile on her face. She leaned into me a bit quicker than I expected.

When I hit my forehead on her new horn, both of us yelped in shock and surprise.

“Ow!” Sakura rubbed her forehead, touching her horn. I rubbed my forehead, touching where the horn had smacked into me. We both looked at one another and laughed. I pulled her in for a tight hug before pulling back a bit.

“Is it really that sensitive?” I asked, rubbing the tip of Sakura’s horn.

“Mhmm!” Sakura gasped, letting out a moan that told me the answer in a much more direct way than words could convey.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

25 As soon as I got clear of everyone else,

As soon as I got clear of everyone else, I sat down and focused on my Mania. I didn't realize how much it had been affecting my thoughts until I calmed myself down enough to let go of it completely.

Your Mania has been reduced to level 0.

You have no bonuses to your Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge abilities.

I let out a sigh of relief. As powerful as those bonuses had been, Mania was a double-edged sword. Towards the end, I'd been going crazy with bloodlust. What were levels four and up of Mania like? I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

I had promised to heal up a little before seeing Bridget, but I wanted to check in on her. Frank and Marcus had set up three tents on top of the building by the time I got there. In addition to the survival packs, which Marcus was rummaging through for a sleeping bag, I saw a window curtain that Bridget was currently using for a blanket, the first aid kit Frank was using on Bridget, and a half-eaten box of Oreo cookies.

I tucked Bridget in beneath the window curtain, before unrolling the sleeping bag Marcus tossed me and helping Frank slip her feverish body inside it. I wiped the sweat from her brow, promising to get her a real pillow when I could. But for now, I had a quest notification to see to.

Congratulations! You have successfully completed your establishment quest and created a settlement!

After slaying the Rat Matriarch, the quest had officially completed. After seeing that Bridget was well taken care of, I headed back to the site of our battle. When the office building eventually finished burning down, a black pillar emerged from the earth—twice as tall as I was and shining with some unspoken power.

The crumpled ruins of Miyamoto Offices lay around it, piles of bricks and rubble jutting like jagged teeth into the air. Much of the building was still smoldering, and we had to wait sometime before the smoke died down enough to reach the obelisk.

Others looked like they wanted to reach for the obelisk, but I sensed that I needed to be the first to lay my hands on it. Luckily, I had both the highest level and the highest Heat Resistance proficiency, so I ventured into the smoldering wreckage long before anyone else could attempt it.

You have earned a New Title!

First Lord (Epic) - You are the first on your shard to claim a settlement. Will you ply your advantage to claim other settlements and expand your influence? Or will you let other lords rise up and ally with them in friendship? Either way, you will emerge as a leader of your people.

+10 Charisma

+10% Charisma Bonus, so long as you maintain control of a settlement.

“Neat,” I said as I got the new title. It boosted my charisma by quite a bit. Thanks to my Death Defier title, I already had a Charisma bonus, but this pushed it so high that my effective Charisma stat was on par with my Intelligence stat—though after title bonuses, my Intelligence stat was still higher.

Considering that Charisma was a rare, hidden stat to begin with, mine was higher than just about anyone else on this shard—maybe even on earth. And perhaps to people like Myrina, as well. I'd have to ask her the next time I saw her.

I did note that it only said I was the first on this shard to establish a settlement, not the first in the world. Earth was a big place with many people, so presumably, there was a faction out here somewhere that started their Establish a Settlement Quest shortly after integration began.

Lyra had used the word shard before, but I still wasn't sure what it meant. From the context, I guessed it meant Crownhill and some of the surrounding wilderness. That still meant I was the first in this area. I now ruled over a burned-out husk of a building... for what that was worth.

Welcome, settlement owner Carter Smith!

Would you like to name your settlement?

I typed in the town's name, 'Crownhill'. The old office was close enough to the center of town, that if this obelisk really gave bonuses to everyone within whatever its range was, I wanted it to be available to anyone.

Like killing Craig, that would help fulfill my second promise to Ben and the others I'd left back in Purgatory. That was when I remembered the real reason Ben wanted to finish

this settlement quest.

Welcome to Crownhill! (Shelter)

As the only surviving member of your proposed government, you have been given the title: Acting Regent.

You currently hold a 100% share of all political power and may enact a vote to change Crownhill's government structure.

I browsed through the options. The System seemed fond of absolute monarchies, as most of the options were some variation of that, albeit with primitive-sounding names. I suppose that was to be expected, considering the poor state of the settlement.

It looked like a series of quests would allow me to level up the shelter to something better, but I wasn't interested in those. In the end, I selected the form of government that I thought would be most appealing to the people of Crownhill.

You have chosen the government form: Supervised Council

As Council Supervisor, you have the final say in all decisions, but the day-to-day affairs of the shelter will be managed by a vote of the most prominent members of the settlement. You may select these council seats or select a regent to pick them for you, on your behalf.

From the wording of the prompt, it seemed I could just pretend I didn't exist and tell everyone to elect their representatives to the council, effectively making this a

democratic workaround. The people didn't have to know I had the power to step in and override everything. I liked the idea of hanging on to that ability, though, just in case.

The last thing I wanted was someone like Craig strong-arming everyone into giving him all the councilor seats and taking over.

Once I made that selection, my System screen changed to what I assumed was the town menu. A few labels popped up describing everything, which was a lot more of a tutorial than the rest of the System had given me. I spent the next few minutes reading through the options available to me. At the moment, so much of the descriptions were grayed out, that it was fairly easy to get the hang of what I needed to do.

Three things grabbed my attention.

Market - List items for sale for purchase by other individuals in your settlement. Items will be held in storage until they are sold. Since you do not have a settlement vault, items will be stored by the System directly, with a fee charged against the item's value each day it sits in storage. Note: There are currently no available markets to trade with.

Settlement Shop - Exchange Settlement Quest Contribution Points for improvements to your settlement, or pay to integrate existing structures.

Job Board - Purchase jobs for Settlement Quest Contribution Points, and see which jobs command the highest value in this settlement. Purchasing a job will include basic knowledge to perform entry-level work—necessary tools are sold separately.

The market feature was functional, and there was plenty of stock already, from bows and arrows to rock-carving tools. All of it was available for a price in Contribution Points. But it looked like people using the obelisk weren't limited to buying from the Market—there was a tab to sell items, as well.

To test this, I picked up a broken brick off the ground and thought about moving it over to the market menu. Instead, it vanished from my hand as though it was never there, and an image of a rock appeared on my screen.

Rubble - A piece of a broken brick.

Estimated market value: None.

Would you like to sell this item? Because the item is low value, you will be charged a 1 Contribution Point listing fee.

I pulled the piece of rubble out of storage and tossed it back onto the ground. There was a gun nearby from a man I'd killed. The wooden stock had burned in the fire and the barrel was scarred from when the bullets in its magazine exploded from the heat. But it still had to be worth something, right? I moved it over to the Market tab.

Broken Gun - A non-functional gun.

Estimated market value: 15 Contribution Points.

Would you like to sell this item?

I declined.

The shop worked much as I expected. Everyone got an account with a special local currency called Crownhill Contribution Points, which could be gained by doing jobs for the city or trading items for them. Presumably, outsiders could sell some of their items to our government for local contribution points. Still, the way it was structured seemed to be a powerful incentive to keep economies local.

The Crownhill Contribution points belonged to me personally. From the looks of things, I had more than a thousand of them. This put me at the top of a very long list of people ranging from second highest—Sakura with eight hundred points—all the way down to just five or six points from people who had done little more than cower in the building during the settlement quest.

I was glad to see everyone was being rewarded for their efforts, though with nothing to purchase, those points weren't worth much. At least, that was what I thought until I started browsing the Job Board.

Purchase a Job!

Currently, Crownhill is not in desperate need of any job roles.

Currently, no job roles are in excess in Crownhill.

Due to the early stage of the integration, all jobs are on sale at 95% off! This sale will be reduced by 5% daily until prices reach normal levels.

Available Job categories include Mundane Jobs and Magical Jobs:

Mundane Jobs

Blacksmith - 125 Contribution Points.

Medic - 125 Contribution Points.

Carpentry - 125 Contribution Points.

Mason - 125 Contribution Points.

Bureaucrat - 125 Contribution Points.

Secretary - 125 Contribution Points.

Guard - 125 Contribution Points.

Continue...

Magical Jobs

Formation Master - 400 Contribution Points.

Alchemist - 400 Contribution Points.

Enchanter - 400 Contribution Points.

Rune Smith - 600 Contribution Points.

Golem Crafter - 600 Contribution Points.

Priest - 600 Contribution Points.

Oracle - 600 Contribution Points.

I went through the list, which was quite extensive. As I went through it, I sensed there

was a pattern to it. All the jobs that I recognized were on the cheaper side. I'd met masons, carpenters, first responders, and blacksmiths in my life before the System. But I hadn't met Formation Masters, Alchemists, and Enchanters. All those jobs were new—and considerably more expensive. They all had something to do with magic from the sound of them.

I remembered Myrina saying something about jobs, and I dug through my pocket to pull out the notes I had taken. Enchanter was one of the jobs she'd singled out as valuable, but it wasn't the most valuable job on the list. Looking at the average point total, 300 points was in the middle-to-high range for what people had. Given the sale right now and the number of points most people had, Myrina probably didn't think I could afford anything better than Enchanter.

Still, I planned to take Enchanter because Myrina had suggested it as something useful everywhere. But since I had more than six hundred points to spare, I checked out the most valuable jobs. I had no interest in being a priest, though. And when I thought of oracles, I thought of skimpily dressed Greek girls high on incense. While that might not be historically accurate, that was what my brain came up with.

My eyes lit upon Runesmith. That sounded like an interesting job, so I took a closer look.

Runesmith (Rare) - Carve symbols of power into rare stone, wood, and metals to induce special effects. Smith swords of destruction or arrows of bloodletting. This skill includes basic knowledge of blacksmithing.

Since I figured out how to bring up a description, I also checked out the description for Enchanter.

Enchanter (Uncommon) - Push power into objects, granting them powers beyond

the mundane. Craft amulets of lightning or wands of fire. This skill includes perception of all basic aspects of mana.

I debated for a while, then took both of them. I had the Contribution Points to spare, and other than a few things in the Market tab that I wanted to buy, I didn't have a plan for these points. With the sale working the way it was, if I was ever going to buy these jobs, it needed to be now.

I accepted Enchanter first, since that was the safe bet Myrina had told me about.

You have purchased the Enchanter job!

Downloading job knowledge may cause some discomfort...

As with the integration, the System severely underestimated the amount of discomfort it would cause. I doubled over in pain, wincing as I leaned against the obelisk for support. But when my head cleared, my mind was filled with diagrams, patterns, and ways to weave mana together I could never have imagined on my own.

Just by staring at the ground, I could sense the earth mana in it. The realization was indescribable—like a fish going its entire life without realizing it was swimming through the water until the day it broke past the surface and experienced a moment in the open air.

As quickly as it came, the intense feeling of sudden enlightenment faded. But the vision remained. I could see the earth mana beneath me and the fire mana in the smoldering ruins. The air mana in the air and the water mana of my breath were all clear as day.

And even better, I knew how to use it all, given time and the right items to enchant. I wanted to test my new job, but I wasn't done with the pillar yet.

You have purchased the Runesmith Job!

Because you already have a related job [Enchanter] these jobs will be combined.

A pain far sharper than before tore through my skull, ripping every thought forming in my head apart in the process. But it too eventually faded, just like the first stabbing pain had, and I found I had yet more knowledge crammed between my ears when the splitting headache faded.

This time, my head was filled with the names of esoteric metals and machines and how they worked. I could visualize a blade made of a dozen parts, one to spit fire and another to spit poison, each working in synchronicity to drain the life from whatever I struck with it. I saw a staff meant to draw the power of the earth into my hands and shoot it out in small projectiles, each the size of my finger. I pictured a flying blade of sharpened steel that followed my eyes and killed whatever I looked at.

There were a thousand fascinating combinations I could image, all courtesy of my new job.

You have unlocked the job Artificer (Epic) - You reshape the magical and mundane world around you to fulfill your desires. With the right tools and materials, you can craft powerful magical artifacts imbued with both mana and unique magical effects.

My instincts had been on point, for once. I'd sensed that the two skills might work well together, but hadn't known that the System would recognize their synergy. I hoped

Myrina would be impressed. The job had gone up in rarity, which sounded like a good thing. I would have to try it and see, but I felt like I knew a lot more than I had a moment ago when I'd only had the Enchanter job unlocked. I was eager to try my new job to see how it felt.

I saved the last of my points to purchase some things from the market tab. My new job required a number of tools, some of which were not cheap. Thankfully, I still had the points to spare. Grimly, I noticed that when I purchased something, the price for the item went up. The Market's prices relied on supply and demand, and the obelisk only came stocked with so many items. Once it started running low, prices were bound to skyrocket.

I flipped through anything labeled antidote, looking for something to help Bridget. I found a couple of helpful options, all meant to treat afflictions. There was nothing specific for Toxic Bite, but there were a few generic potions for sale meant to bolster the body as it fought off poisons. I bought several of them, since we probably wouldn't be getting any more until Crownhill produced an alchemist who could make them from scratch.

By the time I was done, the fires were dying down enough that others would soon brave the hot embers to make their way to the obelisk. I waved them over to join me and explained what I'd figured out.

Some of the people who gathered were wary of me, and not just because of the news that I'd died and come back to life. Not all the people who'd survived the quest had been part of Ben's group. Craig had recruited some of them, though they hadn't been part of the core group of his supporters that I'd slaughtered for levels.

Most of his supporters who remained had already fled, but a few apparently had nowhere to go and had decided to stick around, despite my presence. I wasn't sure if they knew I'd killed Craig or not, but I felt enough tingles running up my spine to know that plenty of people were checking me out with Examine.

Thankfully, everyone was wise enough to check my level before starting any trouble. I was by far the highest leveled person here. If there was going to be any trouble, I was confident that I could handle it. But the next hour was relatively peaceful.

A few monsters came for us after that, but nothing major. Some were rats, but none of the giant kind. There were a few waves of cockroaches and some Fire Squirrels, but nothing impossible. It seemed that the quest wasn't the only time we'd have to fend off waves of monsters.

"These guys just keep coming!" Marcus remarked. "Weird. I thought we'd dealt with the last of them with that quest. Heck, the streets look completely clear, and we scouted the area. Where could they be coming from?"

"I don't know," I replied, though I had a sneaking suspicion

These constant monster attacks would get tedious, considering how many wounded we had. Plus, it was the middle of the night, and everyone needed to sleep. We'd moved everyone into the three-story office building across from the burger joint, but things weren't quite the same. Nobody trusted the walls to be particularly sturdy.

. I dug into the pack on my back and pulled something out, handing it to Marcus. "Here is a potion I want you to give Bridget. It's supposed to help a body fight off the effects of poison. With a little luck, that should do the trick by the morning."

Marcus took the potion and nodded his thanks before jogging up the stairs to give it to Bridget.

To test my suspicions, I headed down the block on a late-night stroll. Sure enough, the monsters attacking the settlement stopped coming for the people in the shelter. Instead, they all headed straight for me.

“Of course...” I muttered.

My Death Curse was what was bringing so many monsters out to attack. If I stayed, everyone near me would be under pretty much constant attack. It was fine for now, since that meant just a few weak monsters for everyone to fight, but what if something stronger came along? What would we do then?

I got a sinking feeling in my gut. We’d survived the Rat Matriarch, but would we survive another monster at that level? What about two or even three of them?

By staying at the settlement, I was putting everyone in danger. All for what? So I could sit around and call the shots? I didn’t even want to be in charge of the settlement.

What was I to do, then?

I stared over Crownhill, the place I’d called home since shortly after graduating college. The System’s changes had already warped it beyond repair, and it barely resembled the town I remembered. And that, too, would soon end.

I was among the first to reach a high enough level to travel freely throughout the city, but I was sure I wouldn’t be the last. Before long, small groups of people would grow strong enough to walk around without fear—at least during the day.

Folks were bound to be hungry by now, and their first move would be to secure supplies. They would empty the grocery stores before the meat even had time to go bad. Next would be anything that might be used as a weapon or survival supplies.

Then people would turn to clothes and the tools people would need to build something from all the wreckage around the city. All would be well enough while there were still resources aplenty, but I foresaw danger coming for this place.

When lawlessness took hold, Crownhill would descend into chaos, man pitted against man as we fought for what scraps remained. Someone would have to forge order from the chaos. How long would it be until these streets were safe for the average person to walk again when that happened?

I wasn't sure I wanted any part of the coming conflict. If I had my way, I'd pack up the survival gear I'd already found and head for the wilderness to fight the monsters. I had no interest in battling my fellow man.

One night of slaughter was enough for a lifetime.

And yet this stupid Death Curse seemed to push me in that very direction. Did the System want me to wage war on other humans? To slaughter as many as possible, just like I'd slaughtered Craig's followers?

Something irked me at the back of my mind, and it took me a moment to put my finger on it. Eventually I realized that I hated feeling like a puppet, dancing on strings to someone else's tune. Screw the System's plans for me.

I would forge my own path. But how?

My mind flashed back to the new ability that I'd gotten upon returning from the dead. It came directly from my legendary Death Defier title, and was my only legendary ability. It was also the only ability I hadn't tested yet, and was likely the only way I'd be able to get stronger without massacring my fellow humans.

I pulled up its description.

Soul Vampire (Legendary) - You have subverted the natural order of the System and convinced others to willingly give you their stat points. Under the right circumstances, you may be able to convince them to do the same here in the mortal world. Grants the ability to accept stat points from willing allies.

I sensed that this ability was my ticket to freedom. It was the way I could bypass my Death Curse and tell the System to fuck off while I did whatever I wanted—but only if I could figure out how to use it.

The trouble was, I'd tried to use it at every opportunity, without success. I'd held my hand toward monsters and humans and concentrated, just like I did when activating Mana Bolt. For all my efforts, nothing happened. The skill didn't work.

I thought I knew what the problem was. I had to connect with someone's soul first, just like I had with all the others in Purgatory. Only then was it possible for me to accept the stat points from whomever I connected with. First there had to be a connection between us—enough of a connection for the stats to pass from them to me.

But how could I do that?

I was still mulling over the question when I detected movement nearby. At first, I thought it was a monster headed my way—I'd certainly had to pick off enough of them, that it wouldn't be strange to have more come my way. But the gait and pace were wrong for a monster.

I recognized the slow, steady steps as human and tensed for fear that I'd need to deal with them. They carried a heavy baseball bat in their hand; the bat resting against their shoulder and ready to be used.

But then I saw the figure's long dark hair shining in the moonlight, her long feminine legs, and the silhouette of a single horn sticking from her forehead. The tension bled out of me as I realized who had come to visit me. She must have tracked me down through the party interface, which was still active.

"Hello, Sakura. Come for the view as well?" I called out softly.

26 “Not for the view,” Sakura replied. “I came for you. Mind if I join you?”

“Not for the view,” Sakura replied. “I came for you. Mind if I join you?”

I gestured to the ledge I was sitting on, legs dangling off the side of the building. We were three stories up, but the fall didn't seem that scary anymore. I didn't think it would hurt me even if I tried to jump to the ground from here.

“By all means, take a seat. There's room for two.” As I spoke, I heard the scurrying of a cockroach following behind Sakura, and I pointed my finger and shot it with a Mana Bolt.

“Farming experience points?” Sakura asked as I killed another monster.

I shook my head. “I wish. I told you about the Death Curse, didn't I? I don't get any experience points from monsters.”

Sakura sat down and scooted close, her side pressed against mine. She was warm, compared to the cold night air. The night's chill didn't bother me, but I was glad to feel her warmth all the same.

“You told me. But I didn't mean you were farming levels for yourself. You know you're still grouped with me, Bridget, Frank, and Marcus, right? Marcus got a new level out of nowhere. It took us a while to figure out it came from you.”

My eyebrows rose. “You mean to say the experience I would have gotten from these kills transfers over to you guys? That’s good news, at least. I’m glad the kills aren’t going to waste.”

Sakura shrugged. “We haven’t really been able to figure out how it works with what little we know. Maybe some testing is in order?”

“And here I thought you’d come out for my winning personality and charming wit.” I chuckled, but Sakura didn’t laugh. Instead, she leaned into me with a smile on her face.

“Maybe the testing was just an excuse to spend a little more time with you? You’re the only one who doesn’t look at me differently because of this.” Sakura gestured to her horn.

That was when I realized I wasn’t the only one dealing with problems. Sakura had gone through a transformation, too, and hers had outwardly visible effects. I examined her again.

Sakura Miyamoto - Oni Berserker (Level 10)

“My menu says I’m not a Homo Sapien anymore,” Sakura explained. “I’m a Homo Hornus.”

I stifled a snort. “I’m sorry. Homo... Hornus?” That didn’t sound like Latin to me.

“Do you think I’m a monster now?” Sakura asked, her voice serious.

I quelled my amusement and met her intense gaze. “No, Sakura. You’re not a monster. If anything, I’m a monster for killing all those people.”

Sakura bit her lower lip, holding it between her teeth a moment as she held something back. I waited, letting the silence draw her thoughts out into the open.

“I got so much bigger and more muscular. I’ve seen myself in the mirror. I hardly recognize myself.”

“You have gotten a lot taller. Honestly, I’m glad you ditched your heels. Otherwise, I’d be looking up at you.”

Sakura smiled a moment, holding her breath before asking what was truly on her mind. “How do I look to you? I’ve changed so much... I’m worried you might not like the way I look, now.”

I poked her in the forehead, just beneath her new horn. “Don’t be silly, Sakura. I never liked you for the way you looked. I like you because you’re you. You’re driven, dedicated, loyal, fiercely protective, and sometimes obsessed. And none of that has changed because of how you look.”

She melted against me, and I didn’t realize how tense she’d been until that moment. “But this new body. Is it... attractive?” Sakura pressed.

“Of course, it’s attractive.” I snorted, rolling my eyes. “Have you seen yourself? You could be on the cover of a fitness magazine. Any man would be lucky to have a woman like you on his arm. So what if you have a horn or are a little taller than normal?”

I felt her hot breath on my neck. It contrasted with the cool night breeze.

“I don’t care about ‘any man’, Carter. I’m asking you.” Her head rested in the crook of my shoulder.

I brushed my lips against her horn. “You’re beautiful, Sakura. You were before, and you are now.”

“What about sexy?” Sakura pressed.

I laughed. “I’ve seen your ass. I’m pretty sure I could bounce a quarter off it now.”

Sakura’s expression brightened. “Want to try?”

Between killing the occasional monster and seeing if Sakura leveled up, we also went hunting for quarters. And every time we stumbled across one, Sakura bent over the nearest object with her ass sticking out.

“Do it, Carter!”

“I think we’ve determined that it works already.”

“I want to be sure!”

We ended up going through an entire cash register's worth of quarters before Sakura was satisfied, though she still wanted to try again.

"I bet they would bounce further if I took these pants off first. I think the fabric is cushioning them," Sakura said.

"You might be right. Speaking of clothes, there is an upscale clothes store I raided next door. They have some good survival gear, and we should really get you changed out of that office wear. It's impractical for what we're going to be doing."

We headed over to the clothing place I had scavenged at before. My fight with Craig and then with the Rat Matriarch had left what I'd swiped previously in tatters, so I picked out a new outfit for myself and stashed away a few spares. These clothes were going to go quick, once people started reaching high enough levels that the monsters couldn't keep them locked indoors. The same went for all the food available in the grocery stores.

"Don't go to the changing rooms. I don't want you getting ambushed without me able to see you," Sakura said as she flopped a pile of her stuff on the ground in front of me. Then she reached for her shirt. I watched her hands go for the hem of her tattered and undersized office blouse, and her fingers trembled as she grasped it.

Then, with one sudden move, she tore it off and cast it aside.

At some point, she must have lost her bra—that, or it had become useless during her transformation—because now she stood before me topless, with her bare breasts on display.

They were full and round, perched atop her chest like two perfect, succulent fruits. Her

curves were smooth and yet firm in all the right places. The muscle tone that wrapped around her body only served to accentuate her feminine curves that much more.

A rosy blush covered her face, stretching from her cheeks all the way to the tip of the horn on her head. Sakura didn't stop there, though. She kicked off the remains of her shoes, then pulled her pants down and tossed them aside just like the shirt. Blushing and bashful, she wrung her hands while she stood in front of me.

She turned slowly, showing her entire body to me. Before, I'd thought she looked like an Olympic athlete, but now I was sure Olympic athletes would be envious. Sleek and toned muscle merged smoothly into a tight hourglass frame that spoke of barely restrained power. She had just the right combination of curvy and muscular, and I found my hands reaching up despite myself to cup her perky breasts.

I was about to apologize and pull them back, when Sakura grabbed my hands and ushered them to their destination. Then she stepped up close to me. Her hot breath tickled my ear as she spoke.

"You forgot to get undressed, too."

Before I knew it, my clothes were on the floor, as well. It was Sakura's turn to roam her hands all over my body. I'd changed just as much as she had. The office life pudge I'd accumulated ever since I started spending way too much money at the vending machine while working for Sakura had disappeared—in its place was something lean and hard.

I had more muscles than I knew the names for, each clearly defined and visible. I hadn't really gotten a good look at myself, but knew I felt good. I felt healthier than I ever had before, like my body had shaken off some ill-fitting clothes that had held me back for years.

Sakura's tongue skated across her lips as she looked me up and down, and I realized I didn't just feel good, I must have looked good as well.

"Sakura... there is—" I began to say, but she cut me off.

"Shh." She pressed her finger to my lips. "I promised myself that if I got a second chance with you, I'd take that chance and not mess things up for a lack of trying. Well, this is me taking my chance."

She pulled her finger away from my lips, and a moment later replaced it with her soft lips. My hands found their way to the small of her back.

"Why don't we help each other clean up?" Sakura suggested. "After all, as long as we're standing so close to one another, we ought to make ourselves useful."

Sakura handed me a damp towel, wetted down from the bathroom, and she held one in her own hands that matched it. I ran the towel along her skin, wiping the grime off of her. It fell from her body surprisingly quickly, like all her skin needed was a little nudge, and suddenly it would be clean. Mine was the same way.

Then, I felt Sakura's hand roam lower. Her eyes remained locked on mine, and I gasped when I felt her warm hand run along my shaft. It had hardened the moment Sakura had taken her shirt off, and by now, I was as stiff as I could be.

Sakura's gaze had been focused on my face, so she seemed surprised when she looked down and saw the size of my cock in her hands.

“A-are they supposed to be that big?” Sakura asked with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

I chuckled. “No, the System improved me in more ways than one.”

“I see,” she said with a smile. Then she leaned in again and kissed me.

She was clumsy and unsteady, and yet she pushed forward despite her fear. I’d never heard of Sakura bringing a boyfriend to the office, or even mentioning one in conversation. If she’d told me I was her first, I would believe it. And yet she pushed through her fear and inexperience, all the same, to get what she wanted.

And thankfully, what she wanted, was me.

She pushed forward, straddling me and bringing her mouth closer to mine. I let out a soft groan of pleasure, pressing my palms flat against her bare skin. Our tongues danced together eagerly, tasting each other. Sakura moaned softly as our kisses grew deeper and more passionate. We broke apart long enough to catch our breaths.

When we kissed again, Sakura seemed even hungrier and more eager. She rubbed herself against me, grinding like she was desperate to feel me inside her. When I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her flush against me, she gasped loudly and clung to me.

With one hand, I slid my fingers down along her smooth stomach. With the other, I cupped one of her tits. Sakura arched her back, pushing harder against me as I teased and toyed with her sensitive nipple. I pinched gently at first, but soon my thumb was

circling the hard nub.

Sakura whimpered, biting her lower lip to muffle her cries.

"It would seem you're quite human where it counts, Sakura," I said as I teased her.

Her response was only to throw her head back even further, her lip caught between her teeth and blood rushing to her cheeks.

After several moments of teasing and pleasuring her with my fingers, I decided it was time for a change. I ushered her to the ground on top of the pile of fresh clothes we'd collected for ourselves. She let me guide her down, panting with eyes open wide in expectation as she looked up at me.

My fingers returned to her clit and I worked it in earnest, gently squeezing its hood and circling it slowly. Sakura's breathing became ragged, and her hips bucked slightly as she came undone. Wetness pooled on top of the clothes beneath her waist, slicking my fingers. She had been wet when I'd started teasing her, and now her juices dripped over my hand.

I continued to tease and rub her mound until I felt her body relax beneath me. Once she did, I flipped us around, positioning myself behind her and grabbing onto her hips.

"Do it." Sakura's voice was low and husky. "Use me however you want."

"You sure?" I asked one last final time.

Sakura nodded, cheeks flushed.

I wasn't sure if I thrust into her or if she pushed herself back onto me, but the end result was the same. The head of my cock slipped between her silken folds and I plunged into her in one smooth motion.

Sakura let out a short gasp, lip quivering as she adjusted to the feeling of me filling her up.

Fabulous Phallus skill activated.

I had almost forgotten about my sex skill. When I'd picked it up, it had been an accident—but when I'd upgraded it, that had mainly been for my ego. I liked the idea of the skill. I hadn't really thought about using it on someone, though.

"O-oh god, heavens above!" Sakura panted. "Is... is this what sex is supposed to feel like?"

Sakura cried out sharply as I filled her completely. She gripped the clothes beneath her as she supported herself on her hands and knees. She was panting and heaving with a single stroke; the way her inner walls clenched and clutched at me made it seem like she was already on the cusp of orgasm.

"I have a special skill, Sakura. I have to warn you, part of what it said was--"

"Shut up and fuck me!" she begged, ass thrusting back with a look of desperation I'd never seen on Sakura's face before.

Apparently, my new skill worked as intended.

Needing no further prompting, I pulled out of Sakura only to push back in once again. I felt something break as I thrust my hips forward, and I stopped. Shit. Had Sakura been a virgin before this? I never would have guessed from the way she was acting now, but she had been rather reserved back at the office.

I was about to ask if she was alright. I wanted to take things slowly, given my increased size. But before I could ask, Sakura started rocking herself back and forth, pushing her ass against me of her own accord to match my thrusts.

“Oh, God! Oh yes!”

Our bodies slammed together over and over again. Sakura screamed out loud, her voice echoing off the walls and bouncing around the room. The sound made me want to speed up the tempo and pound into her harder, and so I did. I fucked Sakura with all the vigor of our new bodies, making her screams louder and longer.

Her moaning cries were music to my ears, and her body was an instrument I yearned to learn how to play. I learned her rhythm and how to push her into the fastest tempo and highest octave. Perhaps another day, I'd take things slower, but the two of us needed this after spending so long in one another's company and never being able to take things to the next level. I saw the desperate need in Sakura's eyes and was surprised to sense the same feelings in myself. After what we'd been through, we both needed the release.

Sakura had been good to me. I wasn't sure when liking her as a friend and a person had turned into lusting after her. Perhaps I'd repressed those thoughts because she

was my boss, but now that the world had changed and my subconscious knew I no longer needed to hold back, all those feelings bubbled forth, pouring out in every thrust of my hips.

“I can’t believe we didn’t do this sooner,” I whispered between clenched teeth.

Sakura’s reply was less thoughtful and more passionate. “Fuck me! Fuck me hard!”

So I did.

As I pumped into Sakura’s tight pussy, I gave her exactly what she asked for. I plowed her relentlessly, fucking her harder and faster than I’d imagined was even possible. Sakura shuddered and moaned as her face pressed against the ground as I took her from behind.

I was starting to suspect that she enjoyed being sexually conquered.

The sensations felt unreal. Enhanced perceptions bolstered my sense of touch, and I felt that effect in spades as Sakura squeezed down around my cock. And from her reaction, Sakura was experiencing something even more amazing. Her screams echoed off the walls as she begged for release, urging me to give her everything I had.

Finally, after what felt like hours, I couldn’t hold back anymore. I exploded inside of her. My hot cum splashed against Sakura’s cervix and soaked into her womb. My orgasm was powerful and intense, sending tremors throughout my whole body.

Sakura groaned, low and deep, as my seed spilled into her.

Once I finished emptying myself inside Sakura, I collapsed beside her on the pile of clothing. Sweat poured freely from our skin, dripping down onto the clothes below us. We were going to need to clean ourselves up all over again.

“Hey, I got a notification,” Sakura said. “My Damsel of Carter Smith title increased in rarity... also, it’s asking me if I’d like to become pregnant.”

I chuckled. “Well, that’s convenient. I thought we were going to have to raid a pharmacy after this for Plan B. Sorry, I lost control toward the end there.”

Sakura planted a kiss on my cheek. “I loved every minute. But...” She frowned.

“What is it?”

“That’s weird.”

She shared her System screen with me.

You have lost a level! You are now level 9.

Warning! Your class skills will be locked until you return to level 10!

I sat up. What?! Something had drained one of Sakura’s levels.

It was only then that I realized I had notifications as well.

Your title, Hero of Sakura Miyamoto, has improved to Rare rank. All effects have been enhanced, and the title has been refreshed for another seven days.

Soul Vampire activated! You have drained one level from Sakura Miyamoto!

Recalculating class level...

Congratulations, you have reached Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Level 14.

Somehow, my legendary title had taken Sakura's latest level and converted it into additional stats for my class. Insight, Aberration and Arcana had all risen by 1. Judging by the time of the notification, it had happened right when I had climaxed inside her.

At first, I was afraid, but then the implications started making themselves clear to me. I could take Sakura's levels. I could also help her level by forming a party with her and killing monsters. Because of my Death Curse, all the experience points from the kills went to her so she could gain levels. And then when she gained levels...

I didn't voice my thoughts, for fear of being wrong and letting myself down. But this was something I had to test out.

I grabbed the damp towels we'd discarded and wiped the sheen of sweat off myself. As

nice as having Sakura do it had been, things would have gone a lot faster if I had taken care of this myself.

Sakura lay where she was, panting, stretching, and mopping up my seed that dribbled from between her thighs. She only stopped when we heard the skittering of claws nearby.

“I think all your moaning caught the attention of the local wildlife,” I chuckled. In truth, my Death Curse probably had a bigger role to play in attracting this thing than Sakura had.

“Crap.” Sakura stood and wiped herself down. She dressed hastily, just as I was doing, pulling her shoes on by the time the first rat stuck its head around the door. “I can’t use my more powerful skills until I reach level 10 again.”

I fiddled with my party interface as whatever creatures were hunting us made their presence known. I kicked everyone from the party except for Sakura. I wanted the experience for these kills to be as concentrated as possible.

“Don’t worry. I plan to get you back to level 10 as quickly as possible,” I replied. I shot a Mana Bolt and killed the nearest rat. It would be the first of many to die in pursuit of my freedom.

27 Sakura and I threw ourselves into battle.

Sakura and I threw ourselves into battle. The creature interrupting our personal time was a giant rat, and I killed it quickly enough. But that wasn't enough to push Sakura to level 10. We needed more. But thanks to my Death Curse, it was surprisingly easy to stumble across small groups of monsters roaming the streets, many of them quite powerful for anyone other than me.

"Heads up, I see some Fire Squirrels," I warned Sakura.

She hefted her bat, though I wanted her to stay back for the moment.

I eyed a misshapen building that looked like it had been part of a courtyard. A truly massive tree was sitting in the middle of a ring of toppled bricks. It looked to be some sort of redwood, and it certainly had size at that level, though the thick branches almost made it look like an oak. Regardless, I supposed I shouldn't have been too surprised to find a group of giant squirrels camped out in what was probably the only tree in the city big enough to support their weight.

The Fire Squirrels soon detected me, and I made no move to elude them. Before my Death Curse, these little monsters would have scurried out of my way if they sensed my power, but whatever the System had done to encourage them to attack me had eroded their instinct for self-preservation.

"Are you sure you don't need my help?" Sakura asked.

"I want to confirm you're getting experience from this. Tell me when you reach level 10."

And also, I wanted to push Disassemble to its limits. I waved my hands, expelling an enormous quantity of mana that washed over the area. The spell crawled over each Fire Squirrel as they shot fireballs at me. I shot a few Mana Bolts in return, but really, I just wanted to encourage them to expend their mana.

The more mana they used, the more my mana wrapped tightly around them. Since picking up my Artificer job, figuring out exactly how the spell worked had become much easier.

I watched my spell take hold on the squirrels, one by one. To Sakura, it probably looked like I was just standing in the midst of all the attacking monsters and letting their spells wash over me. One by one, though, the Fire Squirrels began to pop.

One of the most aggressive squirrels exploded first. Disassemble separated its bones, fur, and meat, laying it all out neatly on the ground where it had stood. The others attacked even more ferociously—expending their precious mana—while thinking they needed to kill me as quickly as possible. They didn't realize that their mana was the only thing protecting them from my Disassemble spell.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

One by one, the rest of the Fire Squirrels exploded without me needing to do much at all. The fireballs singed my skin a little, but killing the squirrels enabled Lifesteal to replenish any health points I lost, bit by bit. I turned to Sakura, who flashed me a big thumbs-up.

“I reached level 10 again about halfway through that fight! By the way, you looked very mysterious and badass there, just weathering those fireballs like they didn't bother you

at all and destroying every one of those things without moving. If I didn't know how your spell worked, I'd be very intimidated!"

"Good to know," I replied. "Looks like the efficiency of converting my kills into your experience points is pretty good. Let's find some more of these critters and see if I can't power-level you."

The two of us ran around Crownhill. Thanks to Power Jump, Sure Step, and Warp Step, I really was quite mobile. It wasn't all that difficult to leap from the ground onto the roof of the smaller buildings, meaning we didn't have to walk around blocks of cut and paste buildings or take the long way around.

The System's attempt to stretch Crownhill had produced a lot of city-like rubble, with Crownhill's downtown looking a lot more like a war-torn ruin of a metropolis than the much more modest town it had been.

My knowledge of the area was only vaguely helpful, but that didn't matter—my Death Curse brought the monsters to us. There were rats, cockroaches, a massive skunk, and something that looked like it once had had been a raccoon. Out of all the monsters we faced, the last one had been the most dangerous.

Waste Crawler - Level 15

It came at us with its teeth and claws. Sakura jumped in front of me, eager to put her new class to work, now that she had it back again. She was out-leveled here, but I supported her from behind.

I kicked things off with Blood Sacrifice, before I started to fire Mana Bolts at it, one after another, wearing the beast down. Sakura made herself an obstacle that the giant

raccoon had to get around, if it wanted to attack the person pestering it with those painful spells.

It snarled in frustration when it realized it couldn't get past Sakura. Eventually, it threw its all into taking her out. It latched onto Sakura's arm with tremendous strength, but Sakura had a second strength skill, now. Her entire body shone with crimson light for a moment as she lifted the dining table-sized raccoon into the air and tossed it aside.

I got one good hit in with Eldritch Blast, and then struck it with some Corrupting Marks. I even used Blood Sacrifice a second time. Eldritch Blast had the greatest effect, but it still left me a little disoriented and weak, so I stuck to the less mana intensive Mana Blasts and Corrupting Marks.

The creature thought it had a lot of fight left in it, but I had other ideas. During the battle, I'd wormed Disassemble under its skin and set the spell to work. The massive raccoon turned monster didn't even know what killed it as its body was torn apart at the seams and neatly arrayed before me.

"Woohoo! Level 13!" Sakura pumped her hands palms-up in victory.

"Congratulations. We'll try to push you to fifteen."

"You know, this will probably make living off the land a lot easier," Sakura said as she kicked a pile of neatly separated chunks of meat. They almost looked like what you could buy from a grocery store. "We could hunt monsters and eat them—no butchery required. The only troublesome part, will be hauling all this stuff back."

"I've been thinking a bit about that too," I replied. I picked Sakura up, jumped on top of one of the shorter buildings nearby, and then used that roof to jump to a taller one. One

more jump, and we had a good vantage point from which to keep an eye out for more monsters.

We sat down for a little while, and Sakura leaned her head against my shoulder. She'd been doing that a lot, lately.

"You know, with all the hides, I've been thinking it might be a good idea for one of us to pick up the leather worker job—or at least to find somebody in the shelter who can pick it up... Sakura?" I cut off my own train of thought as I felt Sakura's arm worming inside my shirt.

"What?" Sakura asked innocently. "Didn't you say you wanted to test out all aspects of that special legendary title of yours? This is a very important part..."

I rolled my eyes, but deep down, I was a little worried when I saw the heat in Sakura's hungry gaze.

"Sakura, I think my Fabulous Phallus skill might be affecting you," I warned.

"I know," Sakura said, shrugging. "I have a status effect telling me as much."

She reached down and unzipped my pants. Meanwhile, she shared her status screen with me.

You have received a new title!

Nymphomaniac (Common) - Your body recovers from exhaustion and injuries during sex. Health, stamina, and mana all regenerate faster following sex.

You have received an affliction!

You are addicted to [Carter Smith's Cock] – While 'suffering' from this affliction, you receive a +20% bonus to all stats. Note: While under its effects, Carter Smith's charisma stat will be 30% more effective on you. This affliction will wear off in 3 hours and can be cured by any common-grade rejuvenation potion.

"You can test your level-stealing thing, and I'm going to test how many more stacks of this stat buff I can get," Sakura purred, burying her face in my crotch.

Sakura and I went at it again on the rooftop. She wanted to try oral, and she made up for what she lacked in experience with enthusiasm. She discovered she could enhance her affliction status even further with increased exposure, which gave higher but diminishing returns. We were able to—briefly—get the boost up to a whopping bonus of +80% of her stats. In addition to her other titles, this made Sakura an unstoppable juggernaut of strength... for about five minutes.

The boost wore off quickly, and it continued to recede to lower levels every few minutes. Still, it meant that if we were interrupted during sex, Sakura could pulverize whatever had disturbed us quickly enough to avoid killing the mood.

You have reached Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Level 15!

Sakura lost two levels to give me another one, which killed one of the plans I'd been

formulating in my head. Getting someone from level one to level two would be easy for me, so if all levels were equal, I'd be able to push myself to become thousands of levels stronger without needing to fight anything particularly strong.

"Sorry for taking your two levels, Sakura," I apologized. "We'll get them back soon."

Sakura planted a kiss on my chin. "You need them. I know you need a way to bypass your Death Curse. Besides, you did most of the monster killing to gain them. So really, they were your levels in the first place."

"I have a question for you, Sakura." I fought to keep the tightness out of my voice. "I'm not sure what you're looking for, but I think if I'm going to survive this apocalypse, I will need you at my side. I don't know if you were just looking for something short-term, but I..."

Sakura thumped a fist against my chest. "Dummy. Don't ever think you're getting rid of me. The apocalypse came when we were together, and we'll finish it together, too."

I chuckled and looked at the sky. "You hear that, System? Your Death Curse means nothing to us! But, hell, throw a few extra monsters our way—it will just fuel our growth!"

You have received the temporary title: Heretic!

Heretic (Unique - Temporary [Expires in one hour]) - Area-appropriate monsters will be cloned and sent to attack you for as long as this title persists. Stacks with other System-distributed curses and negative titles.

“Crap.”

Just when we thought we'd cleared out this entire sector of the city of monsters, dozens more came raging towards us. It wasn't a never-ending tide, though, more like the occasional monster patch here and there, much like what we had been fighting so far.

The monsters sent our way weren't anything special. It was more like a few Fire Squirrels, giant rats, and a huge array of cockroaches at a higher level than we'd seen up to that point.

Fire Squirrels - Level 6

Giant Rats - Level 8

Cockroach Ravager - Level 5

While the monsters would have been too low-level for me to gain much experience—if I could gain experience from them—they were perfect for power-leveling Sakura. We eyed the small hoard that had suddenly appeared with as much hunger as they eyed us.

Sakura lunged forward, her crimson club swinging as she bashed roaches and rats. I laid down suppressing fire over those squirrels. By now, my Mana Bolt hit with the force of a gunshot. The damage was spread out across an area the size of my head, but against creatures with high vitality, the wider area-of-effect usually did more damage than a regular bullet wound might.

Two Mana Bolts were all it took to take down a giant squirrel, and as soon as I wiped them out, I helped Sakura take out the other monsters. She'd lost any squeamishness she might have had before, and now smashed open the chitinous shell of giant cockroaches with her baseball bat wearing a grin. The giant rats tried to corner her, but Sakura stayed light on her feet, bouncing around the battlefield like an acrobat as she dodged and weaved between them.

Those rats breathed their last when I arrived. While I wasn't a melee fighter, my stats were high enough to act like one—at least against monsters of this level. A rat charged at me with a red glow in its eyes, snarling with its teeth bared. The monster looked almost mindless in its fury—like nothing was up there, except for an unceasing desire to obey the command to destroy me.

I waited for it to come. Its teeth latched onto my hand, but it couldn't break the skin before I shot a Mana Bolt up through the bottom of its jaw, blowing its brain to bits. We killed more monsters, and Sakura went back to her previous high and a little further.

Before long, she was at level 15, and well on her way to catching up with me. Unfortunately, that was when her leveling started tapering off; the monsters we were fighting just weren't strong enough to push her higher.

Eventually, my heretic title wore off, and no more monsters came for us.

"Want to do it again?" Sakura asked.

"What, insult the System and hope to be named a heretic a second time?"

“Yeah!”

We tried our best to hurl a few insults at the System, but we got no reaction from it. I had a sneaky suspicion that Lyra might have had something to do with us getting attacked right when we’d started having trouble finding enemies to fight. Still, I had no way of proving my suspicions.

“Well, if there’s nothing left to fight, we should go back and check in on Bridget and the others,” I said

I looked at the horizon. While Sakura and I had been fighting monsters, Frank, Marcus, and the rest of the people in the shelter were setting up camp in the building across from the burger joint. Originally, I had wanted to help them—but with my Death Curse, I was better off staying far away from them.

Now, the night was mostly through. Blessing of the System had triggered twice more since we’d left them, and it was now the morning of the second day. I’d spent the entire night fighting and gaining Sakura levels, yet I didn’t feel nearly as tired as I should. Perhaps it was the exhilaration of so much fighting, but I was pretty sure it was my vitality stat making my body sturdier than before.

We returned to the shelter to find a bleary-eyed Marcus standing guard. He waved as soon as he saw us. “Carter! You’re back! It was a surprisingly quiet night. Haven’t seen a single monster,” Marcus said.

I grinned. “Glad to hear it. We were a bit busier all night, but we scoured the area for everything worth fighting. There might still be a few rats and cockroaches about, but nothing an average person from the shelter couldn’t manage. How is everyone doing? Is Bridget still poisoned?”

Marcus sucked on his teeth and shook his head. “We have her stabilized, but the affliction isn’t gone.”

I frowned. “I see. Well, keep applying the antibiotic ointment. Give it a few hours until the sun is all the way up. Sakura and I are going to catch a few hours of sleep and then take care of any new monsters that spawn. After that, there’s a clinic down the street that’s still operational. Hopefully, they’ll have something more potent than what we can find in a first aid kit.”

I caught a few hours of sleep, well away from the others—at the far end of the block. We found a stairwell to a roof that we barricaded, with doors on either side. That should be enough to keep the monsters at bay. The last thing I wanted was to wake up to a giant cockroach nibbling on my nose.

Sakura joined me on that stairwell, tucking herself neatly in my arms as I drifted off. The feeling of her warm curves pressed against me was definitely something I could learn to get used to.

I woke up two hours later. I could have slept longer, but I felt refreshed enough to get up. Sakura was still breathing softly in my arms.

There was some faint scratching on the outside of the door to the right. It was another giant rat trying to get a bite out of me while I slept. I killed it quickly and closed the door behind me, returning with breakfast from a local donut shop a few minutes later. The coffee was cold, and the donuts a little stale, but they were better than what most could hope for in an apocalypse.

“Hey, Sakura,” I said, waving breakfast under her nose. “I brought food.”

She woke up to the scent of her favorite peppermint coffee and wolfed down both donuts I’d brought in an instant. I didn’t realize just how much her transformation had increased her appetite.

“Where’d you say you got these?” Sakura asked, cheeks covered in donut glaze.

A few minutes later, she’d kicked down the door to the donut shop and started eating everything in sight. Unfortunately, the cockroaches who’d been inhabiting the place until now had laid their claim on everything touching the floor, but there was plenty of food still up on racks under a plastic cover that they couldn’t get to.

Once we’d finished cleaning ourselves of crumbs and rinsing off the sticky glaze stuck to our cheeks, we returned to the shelter.

Marcus was waiting for us when we walked inside. “Carter! Sakura! We were just figuring out how to get everyone organized. The teams Ben set up yesterday won’t work since we lost the shelter and everything we were fortifying. We’re trying to decide if we should permanently set up camp here or look for someplace more secure. We’ve got to find a way to get people into jobs.”

“Grab Frank,” I said. “He should be here for this, too. Gather everyone up, and I’ll demonstrate how the market works. We’ll let free trade do the rest.”

I wasn’t about to force people into roles or stand around telling them what to do. If I did that, they’d expect me to stick around and want me to keep telling them what to do. I

didn't think I could do that—not yet, at least. Instead, I would hand them the tools to survive and hope they could make the best of it.

Soon, I had most of the settlement gathered around the obelisk, where I explained what I'd figured out and how to use it.

“The System stole that idea from eBay!” a man shouted.

“No... it's more like Craigslist,” another replied.

The people took to trading with the market like fish to water. At first, we had to lay hands on the obelisk to use it, but I figured out how to tweak the settings so that anyone who could see the obelisk could access the market—that made things a lot easier.

There were a few rumblings about fortifying the area around the obelisk and making it inaccessible to any outside the shelter, but I nipped that idea in the bud.

“Other groups might have interesting things to trade, as well. If they want to sell what they have to us, then they are welcome to do so. They'll earn our currency for doing so, which only means that they'll buy the things we're selling,” I explained.

“As for figuring out what jobs everyone needs?” I eyed the crowd. “This isn't some Utopian collective. You're all free to do whatever you want. If you think the settlement needs something, find it and put it on the market. If you need something, buy it from the market. It's as simple as that.”

That solved the issue of getting everyone jobs, but the shelter still needed some sort of

governing body to prevent someone else from strolling in and seizing control of the obelisk. I filled those council seats it provided me with Frank, Marcus, and Bridget. Yeah, there might be people better suited to the jobs than the three of them, but I knew and trusted those three—loyalty was more important than experience, in my book. The three of them would just have to learn on the job.

“What about you and Sakura?” Marcus asked. “I was certain you two would be the pair running the shelter with Ben gone.”

I grimaced. “I won’t be sticking around for the same reason that I didn’t stay nearby last night. I have a Death Curse, and monsters like to hunt me. If I stay near you guys, you’ll be attacked constantly. But don’t worry. I still have access to the settlement interface, and I’ll come rushing to help if I notice any trouble.”

After assembling the council and showing them how to access their healthy stipend, I had them hire a few higher-level people from the settlement for full-time employment. Marcus, Frank, and Bridget all had high levels themselves, so between being the strongest and employing the second strongest, I had no doubt they could keep order—or, at least they would once Bridget was on her feet again.

She was awake when I went to see her after the meeting. Unfortunately, the Toxic Bite she had received still appeared to be affecting her.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

Bridget coughed. “I’ve been better. At least after that potion Marcus said you got for me, my health points aren’t going down anymore.”

I nodded. “I figured the extra vitality would help, though I hoped the potion would do

more than get you to a stalemate in your fight against the toxin. If you're fit to move, I want to bring you to the clinic down the street. As of yesterday, the doctor there was still in business. I'm hoping he'll have something that works better than that first aid kit does for curing Toxic Bite."

Bridget nodded, and soon we were underway. I carried Bridget in my arms while Sakura kept guard. We couldn't travel as fast as Sakura and I had grown used to, but we kept up a decent pace and soon found ourselves in front of Doctor Roswell's clinic.

"Hey, Doctor! I've got a patient who needs some help."

"Oh? Another zombie for dissection! Perfect!" The doctor said from within the office.

Bridget's eyes widened.

"No, not a zombie," I said hastily. "This one is a regular patient. She was bitten by--"

"She's been bitten by a zombie and will turn into one? Perfect! I'd love to get another look at the transformation!" The doctor rubbed his hands together, eyes hidden behind a pair of large goggles.

"No, she was bitten by a rat and has a type of infection."

The doctor visibly sagged. "Oh... just an animal bite? How boring. I dealt with enough of those before the zombie apocalypse."

“If it’s any consolation, the rat was the size of a car and could breathe poison,” I admitted.

The doctor brightened a little. “Alright, I’ll help! Set her down on the table over here.”

I hit the doctor with Examine, curious at how his adventures had gone. Apparently, he’d taken my earlier words about gaining new levels to heart. He was the first level 10 I’d seen outside of the shelter.

Fleshsculpter - Doctor Roswell - Level 10

What kind of class was a Fleshsculpter? I was a little nervous about finding out. It sounded sinister to me.

Doctor Roswell hadn’t asked about payment, but we’d brought a few bags of the surplus first aid stuff I’d recovered from the dead sniper. If anyone in the community knew how to use the medical supplies properly, it’d be the doctor.

Sakura handed the supplies off to the doctor’s staff, and I sat Bridget on an examination table.

She sat upright along one side, cradling her injured arm. “This isn’t a dissection table, is it?” Bridget asked warily.

I chuckled. “Doctor Roswell is a bit eccentric, but I’m sure I can get him just as interested in other monsters as he is in zombies.”

Bridget nodded, wincing as she brushed her arm as she slowly unwound the bandages.

“That looks like a rough one,” Doctor Roswell commented as he inspected the black and blistered skin around the bite mark.

In his hand, he held a large bone saw. He looked down at the saw, frowned, and then sighed. “Not quite rough enough for this baby, though.”

“No! I would rather keep the arm,” Bridget said.

Doctor Roswell shook his head. “We used these once in medical school. I was the fastest in my class with a bone saw. Went through a cow’s femur in thirty seconds flat! It was quite the workout, let me tell you. And I’ve only gotten better at it since then! If you don’t believe me, we’ve got a pile of armless, legless, toothless zombies locked up in the storage closet.”

“I believe you. Now, if you could do something about this infection?” Bridget asked.

“Right... right. The pain is probably excruciating. We’ll deal with that first.” Doctor Roswell pulled out a wicked-looking needle, which he stabbed into Bridget’s arm.

She winced at first, but moments later, she sagged in place, her shoulders going slack.

“Oh, that feels much better...” Bridget smiled.

“Your arm will be numb. Normally I’d knock a patient out before doing this, but the

machines don't work at the moment. And I have this neat new ability..." Doctor Roswell picked up a knife and drew it along Bridget's arm. Before she even had time to yelp, the entire chunk of flesh fell off, cut with such perfect precision that the tissue didn't even have time to bleed.

Bridget's eyes went wide, but before she could jerk her arm away, Doctor Roswell held his finger over the missing patch of flesh. His finger glowed with white healing light, and the muscle and flesh regrew with incredible speed.

At first, I thought he had healed Bridget completely, but when the flesh regrew, the bite mark was still there. It was just a bit smaller.

"Hmm... this is a stubborn one. It looks like it'll take more than one treatment..." Doctor Roswell muttered. "Strange. Well, make sure you eat plenty of protein. My Flesh Sculpting redistributes a body's mass from the rest of you; it doesn't make it from scratch. You'll need to regain that mass as quickly as possible." He pulled back, chortling. "I never thought I'd prescribe boxes of jelly donuts to my patients, but preliminary tests show it's one of the fastest ways to add body mass."

"Thank you, doctor," Bridget smiled, wincing far less than before as she moved her arm. "And thank you both as well, Sakura... Carter."

I was going to give Bridget a handshake, but considering the state of her arm, I opted for a pat on the head instead. My fingers straightened some of her gentle blonde curls, and she beamed a smile up at me.

"We're happy to help. I figure it's the least I can do, since I'm saddling you with the whole council thing."

We left Bridget at the clinic. She was healthy enough to talk now, though she would still need hourly doses of the doctors ability until she was better. Seeing her sitting upright was enough to ease the worry I'd felt. She'd be alright. Likely in as little as a day or two, which would have been impossible before the System.

I told Doctor Roswell and his assistants about the shelter and the obelisk. Theirs was the closest group of survivors we were connected to, and I was certain medical services would be in high demand for people dealing with near-constant monster attacks. I wanted the doctor to have a good relationship with the shelter. Hopefully, Bridget could form a bridge between the two groups.

28 After taking care of Bridget, I had another woman to look fo

After taking care of Bridget, I had another woman to look for—I had to search for Margaret. She was still alive, that much I knew. Frank and Marcus had both seen her, but after searching through the settlement, I couldn't find her.

When Ben had still been alive, I would have found the two of them directing the reconstruction effort and giving people tasks, leading these people towards survival. But after the death of her husband, Margaret was a broken woman.

I found her in one of the nearby buildings, curled in on herself and huddled in the corner with her knees pulled tight to her chest, her eyes distant. Her once vibrant face was pale and haggard, and she had dark circles under her eyes from not sleeping the previous night. She looked like she'd aged ten years in a day.

Her previously immaculate hair was a mess, and her trim and proper pants suit hung off her haggard frame. She looked thinner than she should have been, and her cheeks were sunken and stained with tears. She looked like a shadow of the brave and competent woman I had met... had it been only yesterday?

"Hi Margaret, you mind if I sit down?" I asked.

Margaret didn't respond. I took a seat on the floor, folding my legs up to sit cross-legged in front of her.

"I'm not sure if you heard yet, but I'm back," I let out a halfhearted chuckle. That finally lifted Margaret's gaze. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Why did you come back, Carter... and not my Ben?"

I forced a tight-lipped smile onto my face. This was already going far worse than I'd hoped it would.

"There's no easy way to say this..." I scratched my head, struggling to find a good way to say what I needed to say without sounding like a mad man.

I blew out a long breath. "Here, let me start with a question. What did you and Ben think of the afterlife?"

Margaret stared at me blankly for a long moment, but I let the silence hang in the air.

Eventually, Margaret filled it. "I was raised Catholic. Ben was born Jewish. But neither of us ever spent much time on religion... there was always too much work to be done. We thought we'd figure that stuff out when we were rich, old, and had retired."

"Well, you might be amused to know that all religions are now wrong." I chuckled. "Whatever was there before, it's something different now. When I died, I went somewhere... And now I'm back."

With a clenched jaw and a furrowed brow, Margaret glared. "Why are you telling me this?"

I met her glare with a firm gaze of my own. "Because Ben asked me to."

Silence filled the space between us once more, and Margaret scowled at me. "Did the others put you up to this? If I want to wallow in self-pity, then I will. I don't need you to cheer me up. The husband I knew and loved is dead and gone."

I gave her a gentle smile. Reaching out, I placed a hand on her shoulder. "Dead, but not gone. Ben's body may be broken and destroyed, but his soul remains—awaiting the chance to join you again."

"You're lying!" she spat.

I held my slight smile and shook my head. "Ben thought you might say that. He mentioned a few things I could share with you, so that you'd know I really did speak to him—like how you two enjoyed your honeymoon in Paris so much, you took a second one to the Bahamas right after."

Margaret blushed. "We were young and full of energy, back then. But he's shared that story with others. You could have found it out from our employees."

"You bought a fake stuffed unicorn to mimic one of Ben's favorite video game characters," I replied.

Margaret's blush deepened, and I sensed hope starting to sneak in amidst the despair. "That... I don't think I ever told anyone that. Ben might have, though."

I rolled my eyes. "You always say that your favorite color is green, but that's a lie. When

you're three glasses of wine deep and it's late at night, you admit you've always loved pink the most."

Margaret's eyes darted up to meet mine, not daring to hope. "Y-you really saw him?"

A wide and comforting smile split my face. "I really did."

"When is he coming back to me?" Margaret knelt, moving closer. "You came back for Sakura. Don't tell me that he isn't willing to do the same for me."

I shrugged sheepishly. "That's... complicated. I'm sure Ben would have come back if he could, but the way I returned was a rare thing. I happened to have a regeneration skill, for one. And my body was in better shape than his." I rubbed the back of my neck. "He isn't going to be able to return that way."

"Then how?" Margaret gripped my sleeve, eyes wide as she gazed up at me.

"Remember what I was saying about the afterlife? Well, it seems the System has a penchant for recycling souls—so long as they aren't too damaged. Ben's soul isn't damaged—it's the same as with all the others who Craig killed. Given the right body to reincarnate into, Ben could come back."

Margaret nodded, climbing to her feet. Her complexion had changed, brightening immediately as motivation replaced despair. "Alright, we just need to find him a body. Where's that Michael guy? It's his fault Ben is dead."

The way Margaret's fingers twisted made me suspect that Michael was in for a very bad

time if she ran into him in a dark alley. She looked like she wanted to strangle the man to death with her bare hands, just on the off chance that Ben's spirit would be able to take it over again.

I held up my hands. "That is something I'm still trying to figure out. I don't think we can just kill someone and get Ben to show up. Rest assured, though, he's waiting for the right opportunity."

"I should still try... we won't lose much," Margaret argued.

"Margaret, strangling someone is going to be very bad for morale in the settlement."

Margaret crossed her arms over her chest. "And?"

Just yesterday, it seemed like she and Ben had cared for nothing more than helping as many of their former employees survive as possible. Now, it seemed to be the furthest thing from Margaret's mind.

"I need your help keeping the shelter together. I've got a curse that attracts monsters, so I can't stick close to the settlement. Frank and Bridget will help you, but they'll need guidance and your natural leadership skills.. It's going to be hard to help them if you gain a reputation for strangling people in the hopes that the spirit of your dead husband can reincarnate into their corpses."

Margaret shook her head. "Why should I care about that at this point?"

"Would Ben care?" I asked.

Margaret sagged. "I suppose he would."

I placed a comforting hand on Margaret's shoulder. "Listen, if you help look after all the people of the shelter, I will do everything I can to help bring Ben back to life. I did it, and got a special class out of it, so if anyone can figure out how to pierce the veil and bring the dead back to life again, it's me."

Margaret met my eyes. "I want a promise."

"You have my solemn word," I agreed.

You have made an oath! Due to your Oathkeeper title, your word holds more power than others.

But with great power, comes great responsibility.

New Quest: Resurrect Benjamin - Margaret's husband Benjamin was unjustly murdered by Craig. You have promised to restore him to life.

Reward:

+10,000 reputation with Margaret.

Unknown rewards from Benjamin.

You will gain renown for your deeds.

Margaret blinked in surprise.

"Did you just get a notification?" I asked.

Margaret nodded. "It seems this rotten System is at least good for something. It plans to hold you to your word."

"Remember what you promised me! Help the others. Make this the sort of place Ben would want to come back to," I said.

Margaret nodded. "I will keep my side of the bargain. And if I can help you bring him back in any way, you need to come to me right away."

I bid Margaret goodbye. That had gone about as well as I could have hoped—maybe unlocking and having a high charisma stat was useful after all—but it was only the first of two awkward conversations I was going to have today. The second awkward conversation I needed to have was with the man Margaret had been so eager to kill: Michael. In a way, his betrayal had led to my death as well as Ben's. Not that I could hold him to that, with me back among the living and all.

Frank and Marcus must have thought I'd be holding a grudge, though, because when Marcus told me they had him in custody, I found the man's arms bound behind his back. He was sitting on the ground, tied to a street lamp out in the open air. One of Ben's former lawyers stood guard over him with a harsh glare on his face.

I came and stood over him, with Frank and Marcus just behind me.

Michael looked up at me, squinting through the morning glare as my shadow cast over him.

"So, Michael," I began, "we meet again."

Michael looked confused. "I helped throw your corpse in the dumpster. How are you still alive?"

I chuckled. "There are many things we don't know about the System. It just so happens that I know a little more than most."

That much was the truth. Myrina had shared a lot with me during our brief time together. And the next time I saw her, I was certain she'd share even more.

I already knew a lot more about the System than most people on Earth, and it wouldn't hurt to cultivate an image of being fairly knowledgeable.

"That must be some trick, if it can bring you back from the dead," Michael replied.

"It was. Unfortunately, it isn't something I can repeat for everyone else who died... everyone who died because of the conflict you started by telling Craig of Ben's plan."

I glared down on him, and Michael squared his jaw to meet my glare.

He couldn't hold my gaze for long, and soon his eyes were fixed on the ground.

I shook my head. "Ben and all the others are dead. Margaret wanted to kill you; did you know? You're lucky she didn't hear about where they tied you up." I narrowed my eyes and then spit at his feet.

"I... I just did what I thought was right. I thought you were going to kill an innocent man," Michael replied.

"And, thanks to you, that 'innocent man' murdered dozens of others."

Silence reigned.

Frank put a hand on my shoulder. "You're one of his victims. Michael's actions led to your death. As far as I'm concerned, you can do whatever you want with him."

Marcus drew his lips tight in a frown. "The others won't want him around. Craig and his goons lived like kings and used the rest of us like fodder while you were gone."

I had hoped to foist this job off onto the others, but it looked like I had a decision to make—a decision that even the System acknowledged.

Divergent Quest: To Kill... or not to Kill - Michael Thompson betrayed and wronged you, but he admits fault for his actions. The people of Crownhill look to you for a decision. Your choice will have consequences, both immediate and long term.

Option A: Forgive - Spare Michael Thompson.

Rewards:

Craig's remaining followers will know that you can let bygones be bygones, and they may come to fight for you once again. You will gain a reputation for fairness, mercy, and justice. You will gain bonuses for ruling through respect.

Consequences:

You may be perceived as weak and indecisive by Craig's former followers, and others may seek to test the limits of your mercy... again.

Option B: Seek Revenge - Kill Michael Thompson.

Rewards:

Craig's remaining followers will know they are fugitives under your rule, and those who survive may work to undermine your rule. You will gain a reputation for ruthlessness and you will gain bonuses to ruling through fear.

Consequences:

People will follow you more from fear of reprisal, than from respect. They may be willing to fulfill your orders, but will not proactively seek to support you.

I took a deep breath, reading over the prompts before me. I'd half expected the System to demand blood, but for once the rewards for not killing seemed just as good.

The decision was mine to make, and from the looks of things, the System thought this was going to be even more important of a decision than I did. Killing Michael was tempting, though. His actions directly led to my death, after all.

Those closest to me, like Frank and Marcus, knew that. But how many of the others did? Not many, I suspected. Craig and his goons had been the one to murder Ben and I.

Michael hadn't been there for it. He'd just warned Craig of our plan.

I paced back and forth, thinking it through. Being honest with myself, I wanted to kill the man. I really did—and that thought disturbed me.

There was something about the world after the System that resonated a little too well with me. Barely a day had passed, and already I was prepared to declare myself the arbiter of life and death. It was too soon.

If I killed him, people would fear me, just as the System said. And the very thought of ruling through fear set my gut to roiling in displeasure. Hell, I didn't want to rule at all, let alone do so as a tyrant.

There was only one solution. I wasn't happy with it, but I'm sure this wasn't the last hard choice I'd have to make in the foreseeable future. I would just have to get used to making hard choices.

"Tell me, Michael..." I began. "What would you do if I didn't kill you today?"

"If I wasn't going to die?" Michael let out a short laugh. "Ha! I'd probably go and look for my wife. She worked across town, and if she survived the apocalypse, that's where she'd be."

"And after that?" I pressed.

Michael shrugged. "Depends on whether I found her or not. If I did, I'd try to put our old life back together somehow."

I nodded, raised my finger, and pointed. Michael closed his eyes, waiting for the end.

I fired my Mana Bolt at his wrists, cutting through his bonds.

Michael felt the moment his hands were free and he covered his face to cower, only to realize I hadn't killed him with that blast. After another moment of cowering, the fact that I had lowered my hands sank in—which probably meant I wasn't going to kill him, after all.

"Look for your wife, Michael. And make sure to stay out of Margaret's sight," I advised.

"Y-yes... I'll make sure I do that." Michael scrambled to his hands and knees, got to his feet, and then scurried into the distance, casting a wary look over his shoulder every few steps as he did so.

"I'm surprised you let him go," Marcus said. "No offense. I figured you were the hardcore, no mercy type."

Frank put a hand on Marcus' shoulder. "You didn't know Carter before the apocalypse. This has been a high stress situation for all of us, and he's just been doing what it takes to survive."

"Keep an eye on him for me?" I asked Frank and Marcus. "I doubt he'll cause trouble again, but it never hurts to be careful."

"We will," Marcus promised. "But... about what Michael said... You know he's not the only one who has family to look for. Now that you and Sakura have cleared out most of the monsters in town..."

I turned and smiled. "Don't let me keep you. Go look for your friends and family. Tell them about the obelisk, too. Everyone in Crownhill is free to use it."

I returned to the shelter to find everything well in hand. Now that the streets were safe, everyone was running around—desperate to reunite with their friends and loved ones. Teams of people were looting the nearby stores, bringing back everything from crowbars to donuts and listing them on the obelisk's market. Trade was blossoming, as more people started using the obelisk to buy everything from tools for their job to their lunch.

Now that the monsters were dead, Crownhill looked more like an abandoned city than an apocalyptic wasteland. And despite the arrival of the System, it seemed that most of the buildings were still perfectly serviceable. Finding shelter wouldn't be a problem. Things were well in hand and as safe as they could be, given the changes to Earth.

Before long, things might even come close to resembling a new normal. But it was no place for me. As long as I remained in the city, I endangered everyone in it.

Sakura was waiting by my pack of supplies where we'd had donuts that morning. She wore a new set of hiking boots and rugged survival clothes, while she sipped on a cup of cold peppermint coffee from the shop next door. She handed me a cup of my own as I joined her.

I turned to Sakura. "I think this is our cue to leave... this is your last chance to ditch me."

Sakura nudged me in the side with her elbow. "Not on your life."

I chuckled. "Alright, then. Come on, I think I can get one of those cars out front working."

By that afternoon, we'd found a working car with the keys still in it, siphoned some gasoline out of the nearby tanks, and then filled the back with heaping piles of survival supplies, looted from a few stores, in addition to what I'd taken from that dead sniper.

And just like that, we were on our way to our next adventure.

Epilogue (Maybe? Might rewrite this.)

Far away, an alien world was slowly drawing closer to Earth, pulled through space and time by the System just as the Earth was. Much like Earth, this world was home to a people being integrated by the System. In fact, in the System's own dimension, Earth and this world were already forever linked, and these realms would soon be one and the same.

Reality just hadn't realized it yet.

Like Earth, this was a temperate world with a handful of distinct continents separated by great seas, with large rivers and dense foliage covering habitable lands. It was a world rich in diverse wildlife, with a history stretching back billions of years. But that was where the similarities ended.

This world was chaotic and untamed. No dominant species had taken hold, though there was one tool-using people. They were short, green-skinned creatures who would have barely stood hip-high on a human. With their stubby figures and big eyes, anyone from Earth who saw them would probably have called them goblins. That was the name even the System would one day recognize them as. But for now, they simply called themselves the people—for they knew of no other species like their own.

They were a remarkably adaptive people, and the ability to fashion clothes let them live anywhere from the heat of the desert to the cold of the tundra. However, most still preferred the dense woodland forests in which the first of their kind evolved in long ago. The people warred among themselves in small tribal societies. Occasionally, something resembling civilization emerged from the constant bloodshed.

Still, as short as goblin lives were, and with even shorter memories, any progress they

made was swiftly undone in the following generations. They were more intelligent, however, than they looked. They had invented the technology to build wheels, melt bronze, and grow crops countless times... only to lose it all to war, barbarism, or the simple passage of time.

They were a short-lived species, with one of their kind going from a newborn to a wizened elder in eight Earth years. They simply lacked the time to pass on what they knew to the next generation. And since they didn't live long enough to reap the rewards of cultivating the land for crops and sowing seeds each season, or inventing new ways to preserve food for the winter, they rarely grew any crops.

Each winter was harsh and brutal, where the people who survived through the late summer months would butcher one another for what supplies they had gathered while the weather was good. Most died during the cold season, as tribes shrank to one-tenth of their former glory. The moment spring came, however, their numbers would explode again—the people of this world reproduced even faster than they killed one another.

Now, on one half of the world, winter was drawing near, and the people in one particular tribe began to eye one another, sizing their peers up for the slaughter. But something was different this season, for the last moon had brought with it the System. For this small tribe hidden in a small clearing within the forest, life would never be the same.

And with the System's arrival, one young female had taken it upon herself to rediscover the lost secrets of their ancestors, buried beneath generations of rubble under their own feet.

"The stick... why put the stick there..." Tezz muttered to herself.

She stood before a ragged animal hide drawing, demonstrating a peculiar contraption of twine and wood. She'd had success with another drawing she'd found in a chest buried

in the dirt beneath her own hut. That one had been of a great bow that lay on its side, with the string caught in a trigger so that the wielder didn't have to hold the bow drawn while they aimed. It was like a normal bow, but the stick lay across another one. Tezz had taken to calling it an 'across-bow'.

It was a remarkable weapon and, in Tezz's mind, a grand improvement on the bow. The rest of the tribe would be quite impressed when she shared her invention with them. When the winter and wild roots and berries became hard to find, her discovery would let her tribe hunt what game remained a little easier, as well as defend themselves from whatever raiders came for them.

But that invention had just been a modification of a bow, and bows were something Tezz understood. The sketch before her of this stone-lifting machine wasn't something she understood at all. She was barely able to wrap her head around the ideas of wheels, cranks, and locking sprockets thanks to the many points she'd put into intelligence and the new title she'd gotten after days of hard work.

You have earned the title: Mechanical Master!

+10 Intelligence.

You will have an easier time wrapping your head around the workings of complex machinery.

She was proud of that one. She'd poured over her creations all day to get it. The only other person in the tribe who had a title was the Shaman, and he had to fight dozens of monsters and survive alone in the wilderness to get his.

When she told the others about her title, the others in her tribe tried to stare at her

creations just as she had, but her thick-headed tribe-mates couldn't figure them out—not like she could.

She was still pouring over the drawing of the stone-lifting device when the flap to her hut was thrown open. In walked three males from her tribe: Grux, Wraags, and Doik.

“Give wood!” Grux demanded. “We make big fire!”

Wraags and Doik didn't bother asking. They ransacked her hut for everything worth burning. Mostly, that meant her recreations and the twine she'd spent the last three days carefully weaving. Sticks didn't hold themselves together, after all, and figuring out how to make twine out of plant fibers had been her first invention that had made all the others possible.

Unfortunately, one of her discoveries while exploring the uses of twine involved seeing how well it burned. It worked quite well as a fire starter, and her tribemates had raided her hut several times to steal her supply for their own uses.

“No! I need!” Tezz protested as they ransacked her home.

“Shaman says we need.” Grux shrugged.

The Shaman was, without a doubt, the strongest member of their tribe. He'd been a simple hunter when the integration came, left behind in the woods by the rest of the hunting party after they'd spotted a berry bush in the opposite direction.

The tribe had written him off as dead and eaten by wild animals—but somehow, he had

survived. For three days, he'd lived off the land with only his sharpened stick for protection. He probably would have died if the System hadn't come and turned that pointy stick into a staff of great power. Now, the Shaman called the wind and rain with his stick, and burned with fire those who did not obey him. His rule over the Gobgob Tribe was absolute.

"I talk to him! Stop!" Tezz waved her arms. She'd spoken with the Shaman already, and he'd complimented her on her creations and her new title. He would see the value in keeping them.

"No! Shaman says make big fire no matter what!" Grux replied.

Tezz's heart ached as her fellow tribe members tore her last three months of work to pieces. The labor put into these things represented an entire sixth of her life—and now it was to be used as firewood.

Tezz's hands balled into fists, and she tried to wrestle with Wraags and Doik for her belongings, but they just laughed and tossed her aside.

"You weak!" Wraags laughed. While Tezz had put her points into intelligence, Wraags had dumped all his points into strength. He could pick Tezz up and throw her out of the tribe if he wanted to.

He grabbed Tezz's precious across-bow and snapped both of the main sticks between his fingers.

"Mmm... good for fire," Wraags said when he heard the dry wood snap.

“Grab Tezz too. Shaman says we need sacrifice,” Grux added.

Wraags and Doik grunted in approval, and soon Tezz found herself slung over Wraags’ shoulder.

“Come. Shaman called for all to see!” Grux said as he led the other males out of Tezz’s hut, with Tezz smacking her nose into Wraag’s warty lower back at every jarring step.

The small clearing opened up before them, and their people poured out of their huts. The tribe had grown over the season, and all the empty huts from the previous year had been filled with litter. Most of the women born last year like Tezz already had a dozen month-old brats of their own by now—but instead of laying meekly under a brute like Wraag, Tezz had spent all her days poring over ancient notes and rebuilding lost technology.

Tezz was carried toward the clearing’s center, where she could already see the Shaman barking orders at a few figures building up a pyre twice as tall as he was. They heaped sticks on top of sticks until the mound stood taller than the average hut. Grux and his friends heaped the remains of her creations onto that pile.

“Shaman!” Tezz yelled, trying to get his attention, but the Shaman had eyes only for the pyre.

“Soon, we will summon the great spirit!” The Shaman promised. “A great, wise, guiding spirit!”

The people around him cheered as he told them of all the things this wise, guiding spirit would do. From what Tezz could hear, it sounded like the Shaman was preparing to use one of the new skills he had gained after reaching level ten. He was the first in the tribe

to do so, and the change had brought with it mysterious new powers that made his abilities even more spectacular than before.

“Shaman! Help!” Tezz yelled

But the Shaman only shrugged. “Sorry. Need fire and a sacrifice. You ugly, so we burn you.”

Tezz admittedly was a bit tall and busty for her kind. Most of her people preferred females with a more feral, predatory look to them. But that shouldn’t have been enough for Tezz to be kicked out or sacrificed—not when she had made so many contributions to the tribe!

“Shaman!” Tezz pleaded.

“Sorry sorry,” the Shaman repeated. “I make it quick.”

He flicked his fingers, and fire burst to life between his fingers.

Soon, Tezz was tied to the pyre with her own twine. If anyone else had made it, she probably could have wiggled free, but she’d been careful to weave each strand well and to weave them tight so that they wouldn’t fail when she was using it to build her creations.

Unfortunately, now it was being used against her.

The Shaman rubbed his hands together. He held his favorite stick aloft and fire shot from it, engulfing the large pyre. The fire took root and blossomed among the kindling, swiftly growing into a roaring blaze.

Rain spattered down on the sticks, but the fire grew so fast that the light rain had no hope of extinguishing it. Tezz felt the fire climb up the wood beneath her, scorching her toes and burning her alive. The animals they roasted live over fires like this tended to squeal a lot when they died, so Tezz was pretty sure this was going to be very painful.

She closed her eyes, bracing herself for the flame that would come.

The Shaman hoisted his stick with both hands, chanting the spell he cast over and over. "Summon big, tough spirit! Wise and strong! Lead us to greatness! Summon!"

Fire whooshed all over the pyre, and Tezz felt it on her ankles, legs, and shoulders. But surprisingly, it didn't burn. Instead, she felt it pour into her. The fire seeped into her mouth, her ears, her eyes, and poured down her throat. A nameless force took over her body, and suddenly she realized she was no longer in control of her own limbs.

Her vision faded, and a figure appeared before her. He was a giant, nearly twice as tall as Tezz, who was tall for her kind, already. His skin was pale, and his hair and eyes were a strange, bright color.

"Aww... dammit! I got summoned by fucking goblins!" The figure said. "What a pain in the ass. You'd figure I'd get something better than this, after signing up for something called the Deity System..."

"Gab...lins?" Tezz asked in a tremulous voice.

“Yeah, goblins. That’s what you ugly little cocksuckers are,” the powerful being said.

He looked Tezz over with the cold appraisal of a beast eyeing its prey. “I would have preferred a male goblin, to be honest. But I guess you’re my high priest... err, high priestess, now. Shit, they actually put you on the pyre! That damn moron of a shaman... hold on, I need to give him a divine vision to recover from his stupidity.”

Tezz felt someone prying at her body, though she couldn’t see or move it.

“The great spirit lives in Tezz!” The Shaman said. “Speak, spirit!”

The spirit floating in Tezz’s mind grumbled something unintelligible. “Alright, when I give you your body back, you’re going to tell everyone your little tribe is about to fuck some shit up. We’ve got a lot to do if I want to become a fully-fledged god—and from what I hear, this world is going to be merging my old stomping grounds on Earth pretty soon.”

For some reason, his voice sounded particularly feral when he spoke of these stomping grounds... this ‘Earth’.

“We don’t have much time to waste. We’re going to find a weaker village of goblins, sacrifice all their males to me, take all the females for our warriors to breed with, and draft all the kids into our tribe...”

“Why me?” Tezz asked.

The spirit glared at her, and two orbs the color of a winter sky pierced straight into her soul.

“Because I can do this,” the spirit said, and pain ran through Tezz’s entire being. It felt like the fire inside her was turning against her body, scorching her from the inside.

“Oww! Oww!” Tezz yelled. The spirit closed his hand, and the pain stopped.

Tezz fell to her knees. “Tezz understands. I... I worship the great spirit.”

“Good,” the spirit said. “Oh, and one last thing. A god has to have a name to be known by. Soon I’ll be the god of all goblins, after all. You can call me... Craig.”