

# 11 Tears in Time

I turned off agony while eyeing the bugs, "If you try anything, I'll use that aura to kill these insects. And trust me, it's plenty strong enough to kill some bugs."

Baldag-Ruhl laughed, "Ha, ha, hah. I'm here to offer you something that drips with temptation. A deal of sorts that will burrow into your mind and make it new."

I kept my guard up, "I'm listening."

The mound of bugs threaded down from the ceiling, a few spiders creating a silken thread for them to reach the ground. Once they landed, the mouth formed again, and Baldag-Ruhl spoke,

"Do you know of that presence that tampers with my haven?"

"Presence? Do you mean the Sentinel?"

"That is its guardian. What I speak of is the crawling, insidious mind that touches this plane. It warps it, turning it inside out. It breaks the laws of nature and twists them for its own gain."

I raised an eyebrow, "You mean Schema?"

"A fitting name for what it tries to do. That being, it exists without a soul, its touch cold as ice and its mind devoid of emotion. Despite knowing little of us, it wishes to dictate what we experience. It does so *holistically*."

I took a step back from the bugs, "Eh, Schema's just trying to prevent the collapse of the universe. What's an AI to do?"

Baldag-Ruhl laughed before jeering, "So that's what it tells you, and you believe it?"

"Well, yeah."

"You know this Schema is restitching the natural order, preventing the flow of mana to its natural conclusion."

"Uh, what?"

"What does it call the rifts?"

"Er, you mean the dungeons? It calls them cracks."

"These spliced domains are not cracks. These are rifts, splinters of a place that once was but no longer is. From that place, we linger here."

I shrugged, "Does it really matter?"

The insects smiled, "Cracks insinuates that your universe is breaking. Rifts implies that our universe is creeping in."

I sighed, "Here's the thing - both of those options sound really, really bad."

"It's a matter of perspective. This spatial rending is destructive, but only if handled poorly. Within the ensuing chaos, there lies immense opportunity for any that would seize this moment."

Baldag's voice dripped with a deep, primordial hunger, "There exists tremendous flows of mana, a power that is pure and unfounded in this realm. If you help me return there to my home, I will share what I gain from my journey with you."

I raised a brow, "Alright. You got me interested."

I wasn't actually convinced, but it didn't seem as though this hivemind would take no for an answer. The bug squirmed, shivering in place, "Then come hither, little one. I've found a gateway that shall free me from this prison, but there isn't much time now."

I gave it a piercing glare, "What about Stacy and David? Are you going to eat them while I'm gone?"

The insects trembled, "I planned on using them as a threat. I'm glad it wasn't necessary."

I puffed my chest, lying between my teeth, "Eh, I care about them just enough to kill you over it. Would I put myself in harm's way? *No.*"

I didn't want it thinking it could use them against me. The hivemind spoke with a sickening delight,

"You're a grim one, aren't you?"

I frowned, "It's part of surviving."

"You are blessed that mere survival taught you these hard lessons."

"In my own way, I suppose."

The bugs crawled towards its main body as Baldag-Ruhl echoed, "Come then. We've much to do and little time for it."

I paced with the pile of bugs. Once outside the lit torch's sheen, Baldag-Ruhl lit the cavern with glow worms and glowflies. The fireflies fluttered through the air in a hypnotic dance while the glow worms unveiled themselves from the gloom of the cavern's ceiling. I gawked at the sight, stunned by the overbearing beauty in this desolate place.

After an hour of walking, Baldag leaked out its words, "I wonder, little lamb...Why do you listen to me? None have before you, so you alone have given me credence. Others blindly followed Schema, but you are different."

"Eh...You haven't done anything yet. I'm well aware that you could've killed me easily before now if you wanted to. You didn't. Based on what you said earlier, you even heard me and knew about my plans. Despite all of that, you still haven't attacked me."

I shrugged, continuing, "So yeah, I'm giving you a chance. Don't take it lightly."

I watched insects horde over the walls, the creeping tide of darkness wrapping around the cavern's walls. Baldag echoed, "I will not. You have grown during your stay here. Your body turned from soft flesh to hard iron. Your mind evolved from the little lamb to the hungry wolf. That is why I need you. I cannot complete this ritual alone."

"Hm...What does it involve?"

"The golem cores. I can kill any single thing in this cave, but unlike you, I don't gain anything from it. The *Schema* as you call it, it's giving you your powers. It won't give me any, since I'm the infection it wishes to stamp out."

I listened while Baldag stated, "So I will open the portal and go back to my own universe, where I am wanted and not abhorred."

I pursed my lips, "Then you need my golem cores for it?"

"Yes. They act as conduits for mana. They will let me slip through the crack we create, and you can enjoy the mana that leaks during the process. Absorbing it should increase your mana by at least tenfold."

That sounded pretty suspect, but I played the situation by ear, "Alright. Where and what do you have in mind?"

The bugs reached one of the pools, the bright blue water still and shining. Baldag trembled over the glowing liquid, "You know of my domain's shape, correct?"

"Yeah. It's circular."

"This was not intended by that AI, but I've recreated and burrowed out this husk from the stone around us. I've been biding my time and building a portal for decades. During these passing

years, the Lord of Worms stole my glowing pools for its own purposes. It stole the mana I collected for myself, and that cretin corrupted itself using the ambient energy.”

Baldag-Ruhl crept up the wall, “Its mana grew far too thick to pierce. My children and I could do little to stop him. You resolved that disturbance.”

Bald-Ruhl towered over a cluster of boulders that rested on the wall. It crawled over the rocks, so I followed him. Getting over the mass, I leapt off and thumped hard on the ground where I landed. Without the recent dexterity, I wouldn’t have stuck the landing. Looking forward, a tall and wide tunnel loomed into the distance.

The stalactites and boulder formations hid it along with the natural curves of the cave. With a begrudging nod, I raised a brow,

"I can't deny it. I'm impressed you hid something like this."

"Trust me, little lamb. You have seen *nothing*."

As we stepped within, runes coated the walls from head to toe. They mirrored the runes on the Corundum of Souls. Unlike the gemstone, these runes dwarfed every other presence in the cave. The etchings covered every square inch, nook, and cranny of this place. Though I couldn’t read the lettering, every part of it flowed forth in a pleasing pattern.

The formulas, incantations, and codes came together like graceful calligraphy. The sheer meticulous attention to detail amazed me. It was more a detailed work of art than mere words on rock.

Baldag-Ruhl cackled, "You see it, and my creation has robbed you of your words, has it not? My children and I toiled on this for centuries. This is the fruit and meat and flesh of our labor. It has prevented my sanity from leaving me after all this time."

I whistled and mouthed, "Woah."

Baldag swelled with pride, "And you've yet to see the masterpiece at my incantation’s center. It is glorious."

I nodded while we paced forwards. I expected minutes of walking, but those minutes turned into hours over time. Despite the monotony, the walls never failed to amaze me. Every piece of this place was different, and somehow, I could tell with just a glance. The patterns just being carved created an ebb and flow of energy. It coursed across every surface, and it radiated through the air like electricity.

The thing was, I understood nothing about this place. Despite my ignorance, there was a fact that was simply undeniable - this was a construct of amazing power. That was an undeniable and immutable certainty. So much so, I could feel that fact even in my bones.

Gawking at the majesty of it all, it reminded me of a fierce predator's bones. Like those bones, this place was a lingering echo of potential. No, it was more than that. This was an insane, unmanifested cataclysm. In all honesty, I could spend years trying to describe its majesty, but words simply fell short of the masterpiece.

And this hivemind crafted it all from walls of rock. It made me feel small.

That being spoke out, "The inscriptions need liquid mana for their carving. I could refine a drop from each of those pools before waiting decades for them to return. That mana has radiated into the monsters here."

I glanced about. "Huh. The Schema mustn't check up on dungeons often."

"Quite the opposite. They send hunter after hunter. I killed them as they refused to listen to reason. The AI would've sent stronger forces to cull me if it only understood the magnitude of this ritual. But it is similar to cancer under the skin. You may notice a tumor on your back that appears in a day, but what of ten years?"

I spoke with hatred, "Imagine several thousand. That is the extent of my patience."

I frowned, "Gross example, but I get it." I patted my sides, "So uh, these rifts must take a while to open don't they?"

Baldag hissed, "Indeed they do. They're slow and subtle, so you could barely tell they're opening at all. They are like cancer growing under your skin."

I winced, "Man you like cancer metaphors, don't you?"

"I speak of it, for that is how we are perceived. We monsters are simply creatures of mana that proliferate. A plague. A bane. A cancer."

With a dark resolution, Baldag-Ruhl rumbled, "But I will not be a cancer any longer. I am more than what that AI thinks of me. In my new home, it will be as if I live without limit. I will be able to feel the sun over my skin. I will feel fresh water over my face. I will taste delicacies and relish in an untamed and unset horizon."

His voice resounded around me,

"For I exist in the shell of a monster, but I carry the potential of more than what it thinks of me."

Despite myself, I admired Baldag-Ruhl as we walked. Trapped in this cavern for centuries, he remained more than merely sane. He built this enormous monument, and he carried a deep conviction within him. He had something to prove, and I could get behind that.

Those thoughts bounced around in my head while we walked in silence. That quiet turned natural and easy after a while. An hour or so later, Baldag-Ruhl chimed,

"Can you run? This journey will take at least another day's time at our current pace."

With all my stamina regen, I was primed for a marathon. I waved an arm in a circle, "Of course. Let's go."

I fell into the rhythm of my steps tapping before releasing an echo. I kept in tune with the echoes, making for an almost musical run. That continued on for a long time. Hours passed in that tunnel, yet every inch of the enormous cavern stayed etched with runes. When we finally did reach the end, I almost ran straight off into the abyss at the center.

Snapping out of my daydreams, we entered a room covered in the same runic passages on every surface. A colosseum-like structure dipped beneath us, and insects swarmed in all directions. Those minions carried miniscule pieces of light in their tiny arms. With those shining bits, they etched out diagrams at the center of the expanse.

Within a few seconds, they all stopped, finished with everything. Baldag-Ruhl's magnum opus was complete.

I walked along the edge, finding staggered steps leading to the bottom of this place. These stairs marked down with perfect precision as if Baldag etched them in with a laser. Eight pillars with hollowed out middles supported the room. At their centers, wiry claws opened up like hands, ready and waiting for the golem cores. A giant, blue fire lit the room at its apex. It casted a blue white light onto every surface.

I turned to Baldag-Ruhl, "Why didn't you just collect the golem cores yourself?"

"I didn't wish to watch my children die meaningless deaths. The Lord of Worms would never have stopped taking the mana I needed for this. Even with their cores, he'd have just prevented me from finishing the ritual by assimilating even more mana. And so, I waited."

"Alright. Your insects can't do too much then?"

"They are powerless without my direct control. We are legion. Without many, we are nothing."

I put my hands on my hips, "You know, I was wondering, what's your level?"

"Hm, level? What does that mean?"

I weighed my hands back and forth, like a set of scales, "The Schema assigns a level for you. It really just tells you what your raw strength is compared with other monsters or people. I'd almost consider it a sort of mark of your past accomplishments, in a way."

Baldag-Ruhl's writhing form trembled, "I don't understand what you mean by level, but I can teach you a bit about perception, little one."

From his side, a pile of bugs appeared, amassing into a mound. They swelled into a ball then melted away. A ring was there along with a fancy looking monocle on the ground. Baldag spiraled away from the glasses,

"Put these on. They will let you see more clearly."

I grabbed them from the floor and inspected them,

**Monocle of Foresight(Uncommon) - A monocle enchanted with mana. +2 Perception.**

**(Doesn't factor into perk upgrades)**

**Soothsayer's Lie(Uncommon) - A ring worn by a now dead soothsayer. It isn't that he picked a fight with more than he can chew. It's that he picked a fight with someone who can chew him. +2 Perception.**

**(Doesn't factor into perk upgrades)**

I placed them on, and Baldag-Ruhl's level appeared.

**Baldag-Ruhl, of Many(lvl 152) - Baldag Ruhl is a hivemind that gained sentience hundreds of years ago. Slowly it has gained intelligence, learning to control more and more insects. Now it is a horde of flesh eating beetles, centipedes, and locusts.**

**This creature has a long and illustrious history of avoiding extermination within its rift. It evades destruction far better than other, equally powerful eldritch. Cunning, clever, and committed, Baldag-Ruhl has survived for well over a thousand years within its entrapment.**

**Little is understood of his exact method of survival. Even further still, Baldag-Ruhl exhibits far greater intelligence than even monsters well over a designated danger level of 1,000. This hivemind has been noted to use traps of extreme complexity for its various schemes. It's also one of the few eldritch that are truly malicious. It doesn't attack on sight.**

**It plans out each of its attacks, timing its assaults with excellent strategy and depth. Schema has designated its danger level to that of critical. Even though this eldritch's**

**combat power isn't as strong or capable as other eldritch in the same rating, it is considered more dangerous.**

**You have been warned.**

I swallowed before Baldag-Ruhl laughed, "Hah, has the lamb discovered that he has entered the wolf's den? You never left, I assure you."

I frowned, "Well...that's disconcerting."

"For you. It should put you at ease. At least now you comprehend what and whom you're dabbling with."

I shrugged, "Once again, you could've killed me at any point by now. You let me live. There really isn't much of a difference knowing the full extent of your mercy."

"You carry an uneasy sense of calm. Most of your kind lacks that trait, whether your species or another. Such powerful minds within each of you, yet they go to waste so easily."

He crawled towards the pillar nearest to us. I followed while keeping my guard high. Baldag gestured to the pillars using blots of insects,

"These pillars and runes act as safeguards against the dimensional rift. Do you see that center circle? That is where the portal will open for a few seconds. I will crawl through, and the mana that leaks out you can absorb. I need the cores for my purposes. You have them in your possession."

I nodded, pulling the cores from my pockets. I didn't touch the Corundum of Souls, however. He didn't seem to know it existed, and I planned on keeping it that way. I tossed the cores into the coming piles of insects. They carried the golem hearts to the pillars before placing them into the clawed hands.

I gave him what he wanted because I wanted to live. Baldag-Ruhl was stronger than I'd thought, everything else in this cave weak by comparison. Fighting him was no longer my first option. I considered smashing the cores, but he'd swarm me with his insects and eat me alive if I did that. David and Stacy would die as well.

Wanting to avoid that, I did what the hivemind wanted. As we passed by each pillar Baldag-Ruhl gloated,

"It's interesting how dimensional travel works. Most processes merely fold space-time on itself, creating a wormhole of sorts. This shall be different. We will be crossing the vastness between dimensions, where energy is unformed and ripe. To facilitate that process, I require a catalyst...a holder of sorts."



I clasped my hands to fists as Baldag hissed, "These cores will act as syphons, but I still need something more." From the middle of the room, a mountain of bugs swarmed. Deforming like a nightmare, they huddled together, squeezing to a point. They kept condensing, wave after wave, until Baldag-Ruhl's true form stepped out.

I expected a strong, noble creature. Instead, an ancient, moldy shell walked out. It was a walking, insect-like abomination. Pieces of its carapaced skin fell apart, revealing bits of mushy flesh. Pus leaked from these open wounds, and its inhuman, alien face drooled from squirming mandibles. In a grim spectacle, Baldag-Ruhl spoke with agony in its voice,

"As you can see, my body is failing. This dungeon has locked me here for longer than you may fathom, despite that Schema pulling me from world to world. I've grown so very old now. Older than the stone beneath your feet."

The insects swarmed around me, twitching and squirming in waves. I activated agony, giving myself some breathing room. The insects remained unperturbed, and Baldag drooled out,

"I have dwelled long on what to do while I've been entrapped here. I could have created many bodies from the monsters of this cavern. I have done so as replacements, but they haven't sustained me. They would never accomplish my primary goal either."

The monster spread its arms, "The cycle of hunting would continue. No matter my strength, I would still be trapped here. That is because escaping this place is beyond strength. That AI has made it so. I've reasoned that a vessel composed of other beings may be my escape from this place, however."

I leaned over, ready to duke it out. Baldag-Ruhl laughed before pointing at me, "But that Lord of Worms stood in my way. He was once known by another name; Alfred Worm, the son of another necromancer. Alfred's summons and manipulation of mana has proven to be my undoing for centuries."

Baldag's head twitched sideways, "But you killed him. His sacrifices, innumerable in number, have been undone by your lack of understanding. Indeed, I've watched you grow this entire time. You think you've hidden from me, but you have not. Your body metamorphosed before my eyes. You've grown into a fine, almost perfect container for me. For that, I thank you."

My blood turned to ice and my stomach sank. I put Agony over the insects, but they stayed squirming without so much as noticing the aura. A cold sweat dripped down my brow as Baldag spoke from all angles,

"That Alfred Worm, he owned several cores that he held mana within. He was researching methods of giving them a holding cell, a sort of container. That research has been my downfall, even though I fooled him just as I fooled you. My failure came about for one reason."

Baldag-Ruhl took a step toward me, "I need a pure soul, one that is uncorrupted. As the ritual took place, Alfred Worm let the living spirit of those mana cores into his own mana. He grafted the ambient mana to his own soul. He let his mind be torn apart as it held the boundless mana he collected over his life."

I gulped while steadying my breathing. I wanted to hyperventilate, but I stopped that urge. Baldag's body twitched as he spoke out,

"It corrupted him, forcing my ritual to fail. I had thought I would be trapped in this place for eternity, slowly falling apart. Even as the fragmented and tortured pieces of his mind shattered from holding the mana, he continued his cause. He took his cores, instilled life into them, and he surrounded them in pools of mana...Mana that I needed for my ritual."

Baldag glanced at the blue fire, "He had come up with a method of turning my trap against me, taking my resources for his own. He trapped himself inside a pool of his own mana. He thickened it until I could no longer reach him. He had become a monstrosity, an undying guard against my plans."

The hivemind squeezed its hands at me, "Ah yes, I believed I would be trapped here for all eternity, stuck in this prison constructed by that accursed presence. But that was when I was moved to a new world. A world without any knowledge of mana or of the eldritch."

I grimaced, "My world."

"Precisely. I scouted the AI's energy flows, uncovering where we would land. I scouted out the domain, and I plotted. Destiny was on my side. Two of you walked into this cavern, and each of you were going to be sent elsewhere."

My eyes widened, "Wait...You're the reason I didn't enter the tutorial? You're the reason I was dragged into this hell on Earth?"

"That is how you stayed here, yes. In this domain. *My* domain. I protected you as you grew, preventing you from dying to the mindless bats here."

I heaved a breath as I remembered how I survived. I grabbed the edges of my head. Baldag-Ruhl was why the bats didn't eat me. He's why the first bat was injured. Baldag radiated,

"You were so utterly, abysmally weak. I had to injure the first bat's wing for you to survive your first encounter. I then killed it before it devoured you. That was not all. I safeguarded you as you slept. I gave you a goal to push you forward, before others came and undid my plot. You accomplished more than I ever imagined."

Baldag Ruhl laughed and spread his arms, "You killed what was left of Alfred Worm. You collected the cores for me, and you even filled them with the mana from each pit. My ritual strengthened even more from your actions."

A tiny slither of despair leaked into my chest Baldag's body clicked from moving,

"Now your body is the perfect shell for me. You are strong, but most importantly, you are recognized by that presence. By *Schema*. It will let you walk out of this prison."

Despair turned into Dread as it continued, "But you see, with the mana from the rift here, I can turn your soul into my new carapace. I can open the rift and channel the dimensional miasma to my own purposes. I will crawl inside you and wear you as my skin. I will walk right out of this prison, and Schema shall be none the wiser. Your very soul will be my body."

I glanced up into a pair of inhuman, twitching eyes. Baldag-Ruhl hissed, "Do not worry, little one. I will use your soul well. I will wear your flesh like my own."

Mandibles opened up as it spit, "Just let me crawl in."

## 12 Forged in Ebon

I glanced up, my brow rising, "Ah, yeah. *No*."

Baldag-Ruhl didn't so much as flinch. The insects piled up around me, and Baldag-Ruhl hissed out his words,

"Who do you believe granted you that ability, little lamb?"

I blinked, raising my hands, "What?"

"I know of the system. I am the reason you warped here in place of that...Tutorial as you called it. I did more. I gave you that aura of yours as well. It cannot faze me in the slightest."

Insects swelled around me. I stomped encroaching beetles, swung at ants, and I mauled spiders. In seconds they smothered me, and their legs clattered around me from all angles. They threatened to crawl up my nose as Baldag-Ruhl simmered,

"They will eat through your skin in seconds, little one. I may smother you as well, if need be. And know this - I have no qualms killing you. I have all that I need. I'll just use one of your friend's bodies instead of yours if you wish to die in this moment."

I smashed my hand into the stone beneath me and roared, "Fuck." I hit the floor again with three blows, cracking the rock. I roared out obscenities of all kinds. Baldag-Ruhl shivered as he loomed over me. He smiled, "Now, kill that aura before I kill you."

I shut off Agony before Baldag-Ruhl waved me over with a twisted limb jutting from his back, "Come, before I chew off your limbs and drag your torso with me."

With a heavy heart, I obeyed. Around the room, the tunnels flooded with water, but every drop funneled into whirlpools around the golem cores. The water swirled into tiny drops of mana that created small streams of the glowing miasma. These eight streams flowed into the center of the room. The bottom tier of the colosseum filled with the shining liquid, and Baldag-Ruhl spread his arms,

"Go there, towards the center."

I walked with a heavy head and slow pace. Like walking towards my own execution, my hands grew numb and my eyes heavy. My throat burned as I pushed down tears of frustration. All of my fighting amounted to this, having myself turned into some kind of shell. Baldag-Ruhl spread out his hands,

"You will first swim in this mana. That will form the blueprint of the shell."

I reached the pool of mana, terrified and desperate. I glanced around, looking for an escape. None met my eye. Baldag hissed, "Into the pool, little lamb." A horde of insects formed a ball that shoved me into the pool. A cool, pleasing sensation wrapped around me from all sides. An earth shattering boom sounded above the liquid, and the mana pulled towards me.

The mana condensed, further and further until it changed into a solid around me. Needles of crystallized mana pierced into my spine, skull, and bones. They read my very being, and in an immutable manner, the energy tied itself to me.

Once it finished its scan, the mana took on a rougher shape, like a frozen fire surrounding me. After a few seconds, the mana leached through to my blood. It swelled into my frame, and a palpable wave of energy coursed through the fibers tying me together. It imprinted every single one of my cells into its every drop.

Pulling away, the mana condensed into a sphere above me. Everything came back as the liquid no longer covered my eyes. All of the runes of the room glowed a fierce white. As I glanced up, the giant blue fire lighting the room had turned into a blinding white light of pure, resonating energy.

The ball hummed from the hidden power within it. Arcs of lightning streaked out in deafening booms, the density of it further mounting. Like a blue sun, the ball grew and grew until it

collapsed on itself. An enormous, crystallized hunk of energy fell, strange runes littering its surface.

The implosion it left behind generated a tear in space-time above me, exposing a dark, shifting outline. The formless contour seethed umbral energy out into this plane. My eyes locked onto it, unable to look away. As I gazed into that abyss, the abyss gazed back into me. It peered through me as if I weren't there.

Baldag-Ruhl pulled up his arms and weaved the leaking miasma into a single point. The slight, seeping flow turned into an unstable, rushing torrent. The flood of black created dilations in time, certain insects moving in slow motion while others sped along faster than normal. The crack in dimensions gushed out with energy unbounded, and it erupted forth with a coursing violence.

The blue sun of before was nothing in comparison with this new blot of black. This was absolute darkness, the embodiment of umbral shade. It took the opposite form of light, and it absorbed the glow around it. Insects nearby died or went insane, the tiny lives driven mad. Their lives helped fuel the sphere as it drained life from the air.

I ran towards the edge of the pool and jumped, but a forcefield met me, bouncing me back. Baldag-Ruhl announced his words with the weight of lead,

"Shush, child. Lay down and fall asleep. The spell has your soul carved into it. This new carapace will accept your soul as its own. I will mold you into my own thereafter."

The ball of compressed black suppressed all near it. It crumbled me to my knees, and Baldag-Ruhl was rendered immobile as well. He growled out, his clicking, molded voice piercing across the chasm. The ball condensed and moved. With a deep scream, the ball ebbed out a sound like rupturing steel.

Blood poured from my eardrums as the armor took shape. I didn't have time to watch. My mind raced for anything, any lifeline or way of getting out. None came to mind until I remembered the Corundum of Souls. I glanced at it from my menu screen.

**Corundum of Souls(Legendary Unique) - A mythical gem foretold to hold endless mana. The gem will gain life at 1,000,000 creating a living soul, trapped in the container.**

**998,855/1,000,000 Mana Charged**

My mana drained the entire time during the last few days and while we ran. I had to have more, and right now. I reached for my mana, finding my pool full and my current mana regen being pulled into it. I pulled all of my mana into it. The crushing wave of exhaustion passed over me as my mana pool bottomed out.

It wasn't enough. I drained more into it, blood dripping out of my nose. My body rebelled, my coursing with fire. My head screamed out in pain. My limbs shook with the effort. It wasn't enough. No extra mana regen coursed out.

I didn't have the multiple hours I'd need for this gem to fill up. With desperation fueling me, I jerked at the mana with absolute abandon. No more mana came out, but wracking, heavy waves of pain radiated through my nerves. It was blinding and quick, like lightning coursing up my body.

Each time I tugged at the emptied mana, my body disintegrated, yet no mana came to aid me. I peered up, and the black armor took shape. Baldag-Ruhl cackled, "Now, allow me to mold your soul, little lamb. You will become this wolf's skin. You will become this wolf's flesh."

I redoubled my efforts of adding more mana. My hands shook. My knees wobbled. Another vein in my nose burst as blood poured from it. My eyes grew bloodshot. I gritted my teeth. I clenched my fists. Sweat poured down my face as I struggled and struggled and struggled more still.

As the black miasma floated down towards me, veins in my eyes burst from my sheer exertion. My shaking turned into a deep, untamed trembling. I shook in place as veins appeared on my neck and my face turned red. The fingers of my fist dug into my hand, blood pouring from them as I reached for more mana. I found none.

Baldag-Ruhl continued, "Go ahead, child. Let me in. Let me into you."

Blood poured from my eyes and ears and nose. My teeth cracked then broke then shattered. I exerted with a will of steel, pounding against my mana. I demanded more. I commanded for more mana. I willed until the miasma hit me.

The black miasma was a violation, something wrong, something corrupt. It crawled inside the very fabric of my being, bending me to its will. Despite the overwhelming energy and power, it met my soul like a wall of steel. I remained unchanged. Baldag-Ruhl drooled and frothed at the mouth, gurgling his words,

"You cannot stop it. Everything you are will become mine. You will lose yourself and become nothing but a tool of my making."

I surged with a frantic panic. Wild and howling, I fought against the force with more exertion than I imagined I could. I became a pillar of willpower, a monument of human spirit. Baldag-Ruhl laughed at my resistance, but I kept struggling. I calmed, and my panic turned into a heavy resolve.

The howling energies, the ripping winds, and the seething flow of insects fell to a nullness around me. I dipped into serenity, clearing my mind. As the miasma from all sides crawled into me, I defied it. I chose to swallow this darkness. It did not swallow me.

Something within me snapped. A tiny dribble of mana poured out. With it, a raging torment flooded my body. The excruciation tore me apart. That torture was not the end. This was the beginning.

This mana spawned from my blood. I sacrificed myself for it. I poured more of this new mana into the Corundum of Souls. The pain evolved into something sinister. It raged against me, a torment I'd never known. I drenched myself in its cruel embrace. This was my escape, my way out of becoming someone else's shell.

Pain was temporary, but victory was forever. Finding my path to triumph, I converted my flesh and blood and bone into mana. I trembled in place, my body disintegrating into mush. The bonds holding me together gave way, and blood leaked out of my veins. My gums turned to mush. My hair fell out. My fingernails snapped off.

The pain became unbearable. It mounted into an immovable wall. I wanted so badly to just give in, to let go. I didn't. I shocked myself with my sheer desperation.

And so, the Corundum of Souls was filled.

**Corundum of Souls(Legendary Unique) - Holds a pure and uncorrupted soul.**

With the last of my strength I pulled the gem from my pocket. The crystals runes aligned into a pristine, innocent being. It rippled outward with a white energy. The miasma poured out of me and into the defenseless soul. It molded under the current, melting under the unimaginable pressure of the dimensional energies.

Collapsing under the strain, I fell down, my face clapping against the stone. Blinking back white lights, the corundum clattered on the ground as the black energy disappeared from around me. Baldag-ruhl gawked, "W-what? What's going on? Why aren't you molding to my spell? How are you still here? What have you done?"

The blueprint he made hovered into the air at the center of the arena. Baldag peered around, trying to uncover what happened. In a blinding flash, his blueprint of me imprinted onto the corundum of souls, drawn to its primeval power.

Baldag-Ruhl pulled his hands up, pus leaking from his broken carapace. He screamed, "I-I will not lose my creation. I cannot lose it. All that I am is this one incantation. This is my only way out of this forsaken hell."

Tears poured from his eyes as he fell onto his knees. His emotions overwhelmed him robbing him of reason,

"No. It's all gone. All those centuries of waiting, of studying, and of planning...Everything amounted to nothing...I am nothing."

His despair and confusion turned into my opportunity. I looked around, searching for the corundum. My eyes locked in on the now dark stone. I crawled towards it, unable to stand anymore. Forces fought within the crystal's center before they stabilized.

A ripple coursed through our dimension, time slowing to crawl. A second passed like many minutes before the runes ceased shining any longer. The crack in dimensions snapped shut with a cleaving clash of sound. Baldag-Ruhl's twitching eyes locked in on the black gemstone, now only inches from my hands.

Baldag-Ruhl bellowed from his depths, "Stop. Do not touch that. It's *mine*."

He dashed towards me, and his insects coursed from my surroundings. They flooded from all angles as I pulled myself forward. Baldag-Ruhl's clattering stomps grew in my ears as he came near me. His insects reached my legs, chewing through flesh and bone, coursing under my skin.

Before they reached the crystal, my fingertip touched the floating gem. All went black. An explosive torrent of energy consumed me. The exhaustion of before was replaced with a devastating power, a primal rush. The umbral blot formed around my entire frame, creating a set of armor.

It matched me in a manner nothing else could. I found a missing half of myself, an extension of my soul. It had always been there, I just hadn't known it. If I lost it now, it would've felt like losing a piece of myself. In all meanings of the word, the armor around me felt perfect and pristine.

I clasped my fist. Strong. Stronger than stone or steel or this monster in front of me. A lingering aura from the armor's reformation coursed across my skin. From my surrounding darkness, a slit opened for my eyes and light. From within, an ominous crimson glowed out. My armor flowed across my skin, never turning into flat plates.

It was an organic, living thing. Along my shoulders and back, the dark metal ended with pointed spikes. The edges extended my sense of touch to the limit of those barbs. I reached up, feeling one. It felt back as if it were my own skin, hardened and smooth.

Lowering my arm, I gawked at my wrist and hands. Thickened forearm plates molded there, extra weight added just for me. My arms became clubs, my fists the heads of sledgehammers. The armor would be just right for crushing bones.

Especially Baldag-Ruhl's bones.



I glanced up towards him, my gaze menacing and predatory. The blast from the armor's creation embedded Baldag-Ruhl into the colosseum. Cracks webbed outward from where he sunk six inches into the wall. He pulled himself out, standing with shaking legs. He gawked at me, his eyes fluttering about,

"Who are you?"

I spoke out with my silence. Baldag-Ruhl shook off his confusion before gawking at me. When our eyes locked, he froze in place like a deer in headlights. A tense passed over us before he snapped,

"Is that...My carapace? You... *You thief.*"

I took a step towards him, and he shook in fear. I cracked my neck before rolling my shoulders. I paced towards Baldag-Ruhl, fury in my steps and iron in my voice,

"Are you ready, Baldag? I'm going to turn your face to slush."

He couldn't meet my eyes, and he peered away while roaring, "This changes nothing. I will still devour you, just as I devoured the others. I will start anew. I will learn of what you did to avoid the spell. This is not the first time this has happened."

"Oh trust me, this will be the last."

I banged my fists together, a satisfying clunk echoing throughout the colosseum. Confidence oozed from me, a thick veil. Most of his insects nearby were dust from the shockwave earlier, but more poured in from every tunnel. Like a seething pool of limbs, they swarmed towards me. I clasped my hands into fists and activated Agony.

Except, it wasn't Agony. Three notifications appeared.

**You have forgotten the skill agony. One perk point refunded.**

**Unknown ability unlocked, Oppression.**

**Oppression(Legendary Unique Skill) - Your body extends its presence beyond your physical form. This ethereal extension warps nearby space, terrorizing your enemies.**

**Oppression - | Damage - (15% of caster's hp/min + 5000/min) |**

When I activated the aura this time, the familiar pain of Agony was gone. Despite that lack of discomfort, my surroundings bent to my will. Baldag-Ruhl howled in pain. His insects pulled back, and the monstrous hivemind did the same. As he reached the arena's walls, I took a few steps towards him. I bristled,

“It looks like you didn’t make this skill then, You’re not immune anymore.”

Insects nearby began dying under the influence of the skill. Baldag-Ruhl shouted, “This...who did this? You couldn’t have warped my ritual. You know nothing of magic.”

Baldag-Ruhl froze in place. He uttered, “Alfred.”

I nodded, stomping towards him. Baldag-Ruhl trembled in place before roaring out with all his might. He thundered out to me, but his howls fell on deaf ears. I paced towards him, my dominance certain. He reached up his hands, sending wave after wave of insects. They died in droves before they reached me.

As they did, I stomped onto the ground, creating cracks in the rock beneath my feet. The fissures grew underfoot, and the impact knocked the insects away. Before he smothered me, I stampeded towards Baldag-Ruhl like an angry bull. He raised his arms over his face before I threw my fist at him.

He slithered sideways, my fist lodging into stone. My bones hardened, I set myself into my fighting stance. During the process, the armor fit me like slipping on a glove. I stepped forward, jabbing Baldag-Ruhl’s face. As I swung, no spikes or fancy pieces of armor got in the way.

My fist met his shell. It cracked the edge, and he stepped back. I stepped forward. The joints slid like a well oiled machine as I kept pace. I snapped a punch at his gut, and it sunk in. His moldy carapace caved, offering little resistance. My own armor glided like a bird, making no sound.

He swung a clawed hand out. I dipped down, launching an uppercut from my lunged position. The weight of the gauntlets let me sling much more of my body weight into the punch. My strike clipped his face, a mandible dislodging. Blood gushed from the wound before Baldag-Ruhl sliced at me again.

I leaned back, his hand skimming my armor. Sparks cascaded in a flash of light as I pulled myself upright, swinging an overhead right. I turned on my pivot leg, and my fist sunk into Baldag’s collarbone. It snapped, and he gurgled on the blood from his missing mandible.

He spit his green, frothing blood and spit onto my face. My armor closed the slit over my eyes, stopping Baldag from blinding me. A looming sense of power coursed up my spine as I closed the distance between Baldag-Ruhl and I.

This armor, it felt *too* good. With the added power, I reached Baldag like a coming storm. I kept my arms tight against my sides when I neared him. I stomped my heel, crumbling stone beneath my feet. The force traveled through my hips, then my shoulders, and into my hand. I swung the hook overhead, pulling my punch towards me.

The compact, slicing swing slammed into Baldag's little insect arms. His limbs cracked at the impact of my overhand right. A detonation of sound echoed like a car crash. The blow sunk the hivemind into the earthen wall behind him. Pulling back, I lobbed another strike into his stomach, pivoting as I did so.

Another bomb of sound ripped through the cave. Blood shot from his mandible mouth as my punch dug into his abdomen. His carapace cracked. He lunged out with his clawed hand. Vibrant sparks flared across the air as his claws scraped across my armor, but they didn't pierce it.

He swiped again, shooting off another series of sparks. I twisted my shoulders as I whipped another hook against his insect arms. The blow broke off bits of his insect shell. He lunged out towards my face, but I leaned backwards. His mandibles clapped like two rods of steel above me. As he pulled his face back, I pulled back up with my arm dragging behind me. Inertia built into my fist before I curved another hit onto the arms protecting his face.

Baldag's limbs didn't hold this time. They broke like corn stalks before I clobbered his disgusting face. His insects reached me, running up my legs. I unleashed a flood of crisp, biting hooks into Baldag-Ruhl's face while my hp dipped below half.

The insects ate away at my armor and skin, their claws and teeth harder than rock. I ducked underneath Baldag's next swipe. While dipped down, I turned my torso, whipping an uppercut into his stomach. My fist impaled him, sinking a foot deep into his chest. Baldag-Ruhl's mouth splurged blood like a fountain. He groaned,

"Wait. Wait."

His insects stopped biting me, so I stopped punching. They crawled away as Baldag-Ruhl lifted his broken arms, "I-I can help you." He gushed blood from his bizarre mouth. "You've already gained the armor. With my help, you can get even greater-"

I slammed my fist into his face. I gave him a nod,

"Sorry. I needed to do that. Alright, go ahead."

He rose up his broken hands again and sputtered, "I-I can give you even greater gifts. This Schema, you will be its enemy. I will give you more help than you can know."

I pursed my lips, considering his offer. In all honesty, I got lucky here. Even if I killed Baldag-Ruhl, it was this Alfred Worm guy that actually beat him. That's why letting Baldag-Ruhl live was foolish; I didn't trust my ability to outsmart the hivemind. Like the ritual itself, this monster was unbelievably meticulous.

He wouldn't give me another chance like this. Knowing my limits, I took the simplest, most assured path - I reared my fist back and crushed his face, over and over and over again. He raised his arms at first, scrambling to escape. I kept smashing his face, a grim brutality overtaking me.

He fell apart in my hands as I pummeled him into a thin gelatin. His body went limp. His arms fell to his sides. Baldag-Ruhl had used people, anyone he could get his hands on. That included me, and I would not become his tool. Not again.

I kept beating his broken body after he was dead. I pushed the notifications aside after his death, continuing to pummel his remains. He may have a ritual to revive himself. He may have come up with a way to reconstitute his body. I'd make sure that never happened.

So I left nothing solid remaining. My fists turned into a blender for his corpse. I stood up from the bloodbath and glanced at my health bar. A little over 1/3rd of it still remained after the fight. Not bad.

I took a few deep breaths once I finished. The insects around everything remained still. I stepped up, finding the insects dead after Baldag-Ruhl died. I was in a pile of their carcasses. The bats would feast tonight, that much was certain.

After shaking off some bugs, I walked out of the colosseum like I was walking through snow. The bugs had piled up at least two feet high. I climbed up the staggered steps until I was standing on the outer edge of the colosseum. I laid down, grunting as I collapsed onto the etched stone. With Oppression active, I passed out before I hit the ground. I had done it.

I killed Baldag-Ruhl, of Many.

## 13 Spoils of War

My eyes snapped open, and I pulled myself upright. Bats swarmed in every direction, though they kept their distance. At this point, I barely received experience from killing them. I smiled at the thought. Oh how the times had changed.

I turned Oppression off. I'd be destroying them in mass but after they cleared out the bugs. With that handled, I sat up and glanced at my notifications. The first one already brought a childish grin to my lips.

**Baldag-Ruhl slain! Critical dungeon has been cleared! Remember to take your dungeon core before leaving the premise.**

**You've done well.**

I balled up my fists then laughed aloud, "I did it. I fucking did it. Hell yeah."

Peering down at the colosseum, a glowing orb of yellow hovered over the center of the dungeon. I hopped onto my feet before skipping down the broken steps. As I reached the bottom of the steps, the yellow sphere ebbed out a yellow mist. I reached it.

**Dungeon Core(Rare) - Adds an additional perk or attribute point. Once taken, allows passage from and to the dungeon through the gate.**

Poking the core, the energy coursed from its surface and siphoned into my body. It was a gentle warmth that passed quickly. Once the core's energy depleted, it collapsed to ash, turning to powder. I watched the gray fade away, and I couldn't help but have a giddy grin on my face.

I was going to get the hell out of here, finally. I gripped my hand into a fist, putting it against my forehead. My eyes burned as a quick tear poured down my cheek. It had all been worth it. All the torture, all the loneliness, and even the dark gloom...I was finally free. I was going to get out of this hellhole, find Kelsey and Michael, and we'd laugh about this.

Baldag-Ruhl's twisted face flashed in my eyes, and I winced. I shook off the feeling before opening my status. I had points to assign. I placed two more points into strength, two into endurance, and two more into willpower. I wanted the two perks given from strength and willpower, and I hoped fifty endurance would give me another tier of perks or something.

Even after investing all those points, I still had eleven attribute points left to my name. I rubbed my hands together, and I contemplated all my choices. I gained sixteen levels, giving me three perk points. I also got two more after that, one from the core and the other from the Agony refund.

That resulted in five perk unlocks, a hefty boon. Aiming to unlock as many perks as possible, I checked out my attribute screen. The values showed lots of even numbers, and that fact pleased me far more than it should've. After relishing that for a second, I weighed my options.

For starters, I was about to be out of this dungeon, so charisma may become useful. That wasn't a guarantee, however. Besides that, there was no way I could afford armor better than my own.

With that in mind, I put six points into perception, unlocking the first tier perk. After that, I put the rest of my five points into dexterity. Wanting to feel the raw rush of attributes, I selected finalize. My arms and legs loosened, becoming more pliable. My nerves tightened their control of my body as well.

Taking a moment, I lifted a foot. Underneath the pointed, smooth greaves, I could flex each toe in opposite directions. It was odd. The perception carried a more familiar sensation. My vision

cleared some, and my hearing sharpened. I made out the disparate bat howls around me with greater detail.

Underlying the obvious benefits of perception, a bizarre sensation crossed over me. I peered at some of the unmarred runes in the distance. I comprehended them more, like staring at a puzzle and knowing I was an inch away from seeing the solution. Other forms of awareness took hold of me as well.

I smelled the toxic aroma of the bat's nasty breath. I could see just how gross they were. I could hear their mouth's smacking like an old lady's gums. In a moment of lucid clarity, I willed Oppression back over the bats.

The points in strength and willpower glossed over without the same kind of notice. I already owned excellent totals in both, so that seemed understandable. With the attributes assigned, the perk menu came up. A laundry list of powerful upgrades appeared.

**[Willful(Willpower of 10 or more) - Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]**

**[Disciplined(Willpower of 20 or more) - Your willpower is excellent. Willpower adds an extra 2% mana regen for every 1% missing max mana. Your mana can form a shield around you, blocking 2 damage for every 1 point in mana.]**

**[Uncompromising(Willpower of at least 25) - Your willpower is incredible. Doubles mental resistance from willpower. Half of mental resistance from willpower is added to elemental, plasma, and radiation resistances. 1/10th of willpower is added to intelligence.]**

**[Arbiter of Will(Willpower of 30 or more) - Your will can change fate. Another 1/10th of willpower to intelligence, 10+ mana regeneration. 0.2+ mana regen per level. Extra internal motivation and 0.2% mental resistance per level.]**

**[Strong(Strength of 10 or more) - You are strong. Doubles bonus physical power.]**

**[Powerful(Strength of 15 or more) - Your strength is admirable. Doubles carrying weight.]**

**[Cataclysmic(Strength of 30 or more) - Your strength can move mountains. Doubles maim chance, adds 1% physical power bonus per level, Strength adds 5 health per point, and gives 1% total increased total physical power for every 1% of health missing. Doubles stamina consumption.]**

**[Flexible(Dexterity of 10 or more) - Your dexterity is good. Doubles flexibility bonus.]**

**[Lithe(Dexterity of 15 or more) - Your dexterity is admirable. Doubles reflexive and reaction time bonus from dexterity.]**

**[Perceptive(Perception of 10 or more) - Your perception is good. Doubles sensory bonuses.]**

**[Blood Magic(Convert health into mana - Note: Refunds Discipline and Willful perks, canceling their effects and perk point consumption) - You have willed flesh into energy, and so now, you may convert mana into health and mana regen into health regen. You may use health in place of mana. You may use health regen in place of mana regen.]**

The list amounted to over ten choices. I gained some interesting perks in the bunch. I went ahead and picked up Uncompromising, Arbiter, Cataclysmic, and Strong. Those would add permanent, stacking bonuses that would make me overwhelmingly powerful at later levels. Parsing through my options, the most interesting perk left was Blood Magic.

It just so happened that I had much, much more health than magic. I also owned a ton of pain tolerance and a ton of health regen. I picked that final perk and selected finalize. Like the clashing of planets, the perks took effect.

I surged with a sudden, explosive strength. The armor and limbs lightened until I hardly noticed their weight. My understanding of my surroundings solidified. My memory cleared. I clasped my hands, my fingers clamping down like a lion's jaws. My armor stretched as the metal thinned over expanding musculature.

I quit shaking as the coursing energy passed. I took a breath before checking out my attribute screen.

### **Level 82 Attribute Menu**

**Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [15] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [10] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [10]**

My attributes increased to exceptional levels. Despite the raw values, most of the recent surge in my strength came via the per level perks. By now, they made the largest difference. I imagined that was how most higher leveled people would handle the early system upgrades.

They probably hunted down every level thirty perk for the per level bonuses of every attribute. After that, they grinded out levels while focusing on a few primary attributes. The first perk, Body of Iron in my case, decided those primary attributes.

Those factors culminated until every level would extend far beyond a single attribute point. Thinking that through, I figured I'd do the same. With that handled, I checked out my player screen. A message appeared.

**You have reached an effective damage resistance cap of 95%**

I leaned back, gawking at how high that number was. 95%? Psh, that sounded absurd. If someone hit me with twenty points of damage, I'd only take one point in turn. Why wouldn't everyone just bulk up beyond belief and be invincible?

I narrowed my eyes, thinking of how quickly Baldag-Ruhl damaged me with his insects. If I lacked my 90% damage resistance then, I would've been eaten alive in seconds. Schema could be making everyone bulk lords, sure, but that seemed unlikely. If anything, it seemed like higher level enemies might just put out absurd levels of damage.

The kind of damage that required 95% damage resistance to be the standard.

A chill ran up my spine at the prospect, but I kept looking through my notifications. Another one caught my eye.

**The Harbinger of Cataclysm (Body Type, Legendary) - Armor mirroring eldritch skin and an unknown substance. This extension of your body can absorb rift energy, also known as ambient mana, for evolutions. These evolutions may add other special effects.**

**Note: Cannot be removed, only altered. Armor is regenerated with health.**

**0/2,000,000 Mana left till next evolution.**

**Effects:**

**A Harbinger's Might - Increases your damage reduction cap by 1% | Current Max: 96%**

**The Walking Calamity - Gives unique ability Oppression | Current Damage: (5000 + 15% of your health/min) within a 100ft radius.**

***- From a different plane, I rise. I usher forth creation through ruin.***

I liked how the system laid out the effects, making it easy for me to understand. Oppression acted as a replacement for Agony, kind of like the skill fused with the armor. At the same time, the damage resistance seemed absurd as well, but like I mentioned earlier, I might need it in the future.

A few other points that caught my eye was the name itself. It was, uh...A bit much if you asked me. I mean, I was a fighter, sure, but The Harbinger of Cataclysm? It almost made me laugh out loud at how overkill it was.

Either way, I opened my character screen.

**Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen**



**Health - 1,490/1,490 | Health Regen - 323.6/min | Stamina - 1,004/1,004 | Stamina Regeneration - 27.7/sec | Damage Resistance - 96% | Mental Resistance - 93.6% | Physical Power - (+)327% | Damage Increase - 5%**

**Aura - Oppression | Current Damage: (5000 + 15% of your health)/minute within a 100ft radius.**

I was a tough cookie, let me tell you. My physical power bonus went through the roof, my health regen doubled with Blood Magic, and the extra hp from Cataclysmic gave me extra oomph. With Agony evolving into Oppression, I could afford to take more damage during my fights as well.

Even if the whole Harbinger title was a bit excessive, the armor could evolve from ambient mana, so I might be able to make the armor worthy of its name one day. Getting the energy would be the problem, however. Peering around, most of the creatures and pools of mana would fall into the mana category. That meant the more monsters I killed, the stronger my armor would grow.

I would build it up, brick by brick.

With my status squared away I stood up and started my walk out of the middle chamber. There were too many bugs for me to stay here, and Baldag-Ruhl lacked any physical possessions to loot anyways. Peering around, the bats changed their shapes, turning the bugs into mass. A few of the flying creatures even gained a few levels. I'd wait for them to really charge up for the extra exp.

Peering around, I found the main thing I wanted to keep - the runes Baldag-Ruhl carved. It didn't take a genius to recognize one; these markings were special. I resolved to one day come back once I knew something about them.

Thinking of which, I reached for my mana. I found none waiting for me. I tried summoning the little blue mana stream from before. An almost non-existent burn spread from my hand as a red fog appeared. I placed my hand over the reddish cloud, and the same cool air sensation crossed over it.

A notification appeared.

**New Skill! Blood Magic Manipulation(Ivl 1) - Some wield their bodies as weapons. Others use their minds. You meld the two, becoming greater than either possibility. +1% to fluidity and usage of Blood Magic.**

**Skill deleted - Mana manipulation(Ivl 1) Half of the skill's ungained points convert into gained skill points.**

I grinned at the easy forty nine skill points. I put them into Obliterator before I ran down the tunnel leading here from BloodHollow's outer ring. Wondering where my party was, two red

marks popped up in my status. It felt like Schema was looking out for me, and using that direction, I picked up my pace.

Running fast, my feet pounded against the stone and wind passed by my face. I picked up ever greater speed, running faster than I ever have. I kept running, finally free from the chains of my high constitution. My strength, dexterity, and other attributes came together at that point, giving me the mobility I so desired.

I couldn't believe how much fun just running was with the body I had. The rush of speed. The sensation of my body flowing as one unit. The rush of speed. Alright, I said it twice. Sue me.

I sprinted down the hallway, my feet cracking stone with each pounding stomp. Within an hour, I rushed out of the tunnel and crashed into a boulder hiding it. A thunderous explosion echoed throughout the cavern. I sunk into the rock, dust floating around me. Gaping fissures lined the boulder before I pulled myself out.

I smiled at it before bending down and leaping up. I jumped too high before losing my balance. Falling flat on my face, I thanked my armor for the helmet keeping me from breaking my neck. This was more dangerous than a thought.

I took a moment before trying again. This time, I got over it without taking myself out. Landing on the other side, bits of boulder flung off my shoulder from smashing into it earlier. I brushed some powdered rock off my arms, grinning like a kid during his first sugar rush. I won't deny it. The rush of power was intoxicating.

It was a good day to be alive.

But that was enough of that. It was time to find David and Stacy. They wouldn't be able to get out without my help. I didn't care too much about them, but I wouldn't leave them here stranded.

I sprinted towards our previous encampment, shutting Oppression down. I might have killed them in a few seconds with it on at this point. I couldn't say, but either way, I wouldn't take my chances. I didn't want to murder someone if I could help it.

Falling into the rhythm of running, my feet pounded against the stone as I ran. The pitter patter ended when I got a sight of a glowing, fiery gemstone in the distance. Having sprinted in darkness, I fell a few times. Just sight alone bolstered my already high spirits.

Stacy and David sat around the campfire, Stacy drying off from something. Between them both, a chest laid open while they read a book between them. Worn, ragged, and thin, the booklet looked more like a used napkin than a proper publication. Despite the book's appearance, it enraptured both Stacy and David alike.

Hah. I shouldn't have judged a book by its cover. As I got within earshot of them both, they peered around and pulled out their bows. David shouted at Stacy, "I told you we should have never come to this forsaken cave."

Stacy shouted, "You're the one that mentioned it before we left. I would never have thought of this if it wasn't for you."

They shot right at me, their aim steady and true. Hitting a thickened chestplate, the arrows broke on the metal like throwing sticks at a tank. I slowed down as I reached them. I glanced up, slow and foreboding as I said in a deep voice,

"I have come. Come to steal your souls and devour your bones."

David and Stacy screamed before I burst into laughter. They glanced at each other, confused before David mused, "Wait a second. That voice is familiar."

I nodded, "Of course it is." I pointed at myself, "I got this sweet new set of armor."

Stacy glanced at David before turning back to me. The oddest look popped up on their faces. I put my hands on my hips, expecting them to snap out of it. They didn't.

I spread out my hands, "Guys, it's me. Daniel."

They gawked, and Stacy mouthed "Daniel? That's you?"

I leaned back, "Uh, yeah. The one and only."

She frowned, "What...What happened to you?"

At this point, I got worried. I pointed a thumb at myself, "I killed the boss. I got some armor. We can leave now."

David took a step back, "Uh...uhm."

Fed up, I snapped at them, "What the hell is wrong with you guys? This is good news, isn't it?"

They peered at each other, worry spread over their faces. David grimaced, "I don't know how to break this too you man...But, uh, you're the boss now."

My eyes widened as my stomach sank,

"Wait a minute...I'm the boss now?"