

19 Feasting on Monsters

Torix stepped back, “Let’s see if your actions speak as loudly as your words.”

The monster squirmed out. A ball of writhing limbs and human teeth, the abomination swelled towards me. From its sides, tentacles shot out, hungry and wanting. They launched like lightning and thunder. I ran forward, making them miss. They stabbed into the stone beneath me, where no runes lingered.

As the eyeball darted above me, a green blob plopped out of the portal. It slapped the floor with a wet thud. Meeting it, I smashed my fist into the monster, busting the sac of blood. From the wound, intestines flew outwards. They latched onto me, crawling over my skin. Tiny needle prods pierced at thinner spots of my armor, searching for my skin.

I shouted, “What the hell is this?”

Torix stood with his hands interlocked behind himself,

“This is a lesson. You may not always be able to fight monsters in hand to hand combat. Innovate to some degree, and you will become better for it.”

I pulled the mass off me, ripping the bloody bowels. It scrambled on the ground, lurching out off instinct. The intestines found me before launching out like a dozen spears. I covered my face, waiting for a spray of needles and flesh.

Instead, a mouth opened from my chest plate, the teeth like broken rebar. They crunched into the tentacles, spilling blood like water hoses. Torix’s eyes flared, “Oh, now that is *interesting*.”

The monster’s bowels cut before it scrambled towards me. Taking charge of the situation, I stepped back with controlled, timed steps. I jabbed out at nearby tentacles when they lashed toward me. Keeping my distance, I kept my peripheral vision on the floating eye above us.

Oppression would’ve simplified the battle, but Torix investigated runes on a nearby wall. Damaging him wasn’t an option, and even if jabbing slowed this thing’s demise, it would eventually kill it. Doing just that, I executed my makeshift strategy.

Blood gushed in directions, slick and slimy like egg yolks. It drenched our surroundings, and I couldn’t believe how much blood this creature had, almost like there was an ocean inside it. That blood loss meant it couldn’t fight forever. I could.

So I kited the beast with condensed strikes. Short and sweet, just like I was coached in boxing. I even let out a few kicks here or there. Once the monster slowed down, I packed on more and

more heat. I wouldn't waste my chances of inflicting damage. When I committed to a strike, the hovering eyeball shot out a beam at me.

It pierced several inches into one of my shoulders, spines erupting from the wound. A quick jerk and the growing, green mass of spines fell to the ground. It squirmed before I stomped it. I grimaced as the intestine monster got on me again, searching for a way into my body. Slamming it off again, I regained distance.

Paying closer attention to the eyeball above, I kept my diligence and patience high. Over time, the bowel beast stopped writhing with violence. When its movements turned like sludge, I charged into it. The eyeball above caught the opening, but I lifted the viscera monster as a shield.

Blood gushed before I turned my hips. I torqued with my whole body as I slammed the guts into the ground. They splattered, and I lifted my hands. I mauled the goopy aberration into a thin liquid, taking two beams to my back in the process. I crushed and crumbled the viscera first before reaching around my back.

Alive and growing, I dislodged the two parasitic incarnations infesting me. They splattered down before squirming back to me on tiny legs. The eyeball above charged once more, but I dodged its laser by rolling to the parasites.

I grabbed them before chunking them at the floating eye. They tore into its body before I sprinted at it. With a growl, I leaped and stabbed my fingertips into its iris. It fell down, leaving a crack in the rock. In a primal rage, I ripped and roared. I punched and pummeled. I gouged it apart, and by the time I finished, blood soaked between the cracks of my armor.

It dripped off me as I turned to Torix, a wild look in my eye, "Who's next?"

Torix laughed, "Hah hah! You really do feast on monsters. How about something less monstrous then, hm?"

I caught my breath as a knight of shadow walked from Torix's portal. With a sword of night and a cape darker than coal, its red eyes glared out from behind its helm. I shook blood off my hands and legs, frowning at it,

"A Knight, huh?"

It lifted its hands over its head, angling its sword downwards. Taking steps at me, it maintained a steady progression before getting close. As it did, I charged. It stabbed forwards when I got close, slipping its sword inches into my armor. When I tried grabbing the blade, it darted back, pulling its sword with it. As it did, the blade hung in my wounds, the knight having to jerk the edge out.

It littered me with injuries, the reach of the sword difficult to deal with. Not knowing how my build worked, the knight let me trot backward, giving me time to heal and reassess. After the reset, I bolted towards it once more, fienting to slap the blade aside. The knight stepped back, sweeping its feet in an arc. Its sword swung as it did, building momentum in the weapon.

When the blade got close, I stood there and braced myself, letting it dig into my side. The blade sliced several inches into my chest. Torix scoffed,

"An expert in unarmed combat, are you?"

I lifted my elbow and put a foot forward. Jerking my elbow down, I pulled my knee up against the sword. The clashing forces shattered the blade. The knight stumbled back as I picked pieces of umbral metal from my side. I smiled underneath my helm, and my armor grinned with me. It ebbed out with the sound of shearing metal, relishing the battle.

A piece of me enjoyed it too.

The knight threw the handle of its sword at me, but I ducked under it. I pounded my fists together while walking towards the knight. I growled,

"Come on."

I got close, and when I punched forwards with my right hand, the knight ducked below. It shot a left hook right for my gut. Years of training kicking in, and I snapped my right hand back and down in an instant. My right elbow blocked its left body blow. The force of its strike dented my armor, but it left the knight vulnerable.

I turned on the balls of my feet, slamming a left hook into its face. The helm of the knight dented as it pulled its arm back and shot another haymaker at my face with its right arm. I tilted my head, his armored hand scraping the top of my helm.

Reaching out my left hand, I countered its heavy haymaker. Crushing into its face, it stumbled backward while I kept close. Getting overwhelmed, the knight covered its face with its arms. I unleashed a slicing hook towards its exposed stomach. The weighted blow clapped against his armor, bending the plates.

Two more body blows later, and the knight sliced a left forward. He caught me, my vision blurring white. My assault stopped, it got its bearings and fired a left hand right at my jaw. Tilting my head again, the blow slid past my face as I clapped him with a left straight.

He swung wild and wide, making even my counters land well. A few cringe inducing blows later, and the knight hobbled on its feet. He lost his legs by now, so I closed in for the kill. Turning like a tornado, I fired off strike after strike, wailing on the guy.

He hit me without any weight in his punches or kicks. The knight was well versed in fighting through a controlled, rigid manner. In order to win, I injected a frenetic pacing that eliminated his best assets. After a minute of my fists clanging on steel, the knight slowed. After two, the knight let me land blows into its sides.

After three, I ducked and weaved around his blows, smashing him with heavy hooks. I mauled through the metal shell carried as his shield. I smashed through his helm. I grinded his teeth to powder. I broke his ribs to shards. In time, I cracked his face to mush.

When it fell, I stood over him. From above, I whipped my entire body weight into every hit. As it finally died, I fell backward, taking deep breaths while sweat poured from my brow. My helmet flowed off my face while I gasped between breaths,

"Who...Who's next?"

Torix scoffed, "Let's wait until you've at least caught your breath. There's plenty of time for this."

I turned to him, "I can keep going."

Torix's fire eyes flared, "But must you?"

I blinked, thinking it over. Did I have to keep going? I didn't, and rest seemed so pleasant right now. The familiar lich even offered it without any cons, outside of time of course. However, that was the crux of the issue. Thoughts of my friends passed over me, along with my own close calls with death.

I wanted to rest, but I didn't require it to keep going. I pushed myself upright, a surge of excitement racing up my spine. It surprised me, how exhilarating the battles were and would be. I lifted myself back up, my helmet flowing back over my face. I banged my chest for a second, psyching myself up before raising my hands,

"Yeah, I'm ready. Let's go."

Torix gawked at me as if I were crazy, but he let it go as he shook his head, "If...If you wish. Let's find another beast to demonstrate adaptability in combat. Hm, try your fists against this creature."

From Torix's portal, a ghoul slinked out. Spectral and immaterial, I couldn't even touch him. He unleashed bolts of lightning, streams of ice, and plumes of fire. The elemental clouds raged around me, and I swung at the monster with no mercy. Well, mercy or no mercy, I hit air with each punch.

Lacking a physical form meant fist fighting fell flat on its face. That's when an idea snapped into my head. Enchantments let people hit ghosts in most games, either that or magic. My magic,

weak and elementary as it was, still existed. Wielding those mana plumes, I channeled my blood into my fists.

Bursting forth from my hands, tiny, miniscule breezes oozed out. Red and not exactly menacing, my hands turned into air conditioners as I swung them. Despite the magic's lack of oomph, it still let me hit the ghost. Upon contact, the ghoul splattered like hitting a sack of toothpaste. Torix cackled at me, "And you call *that* magic?"

I smashed the ghoul against the enchanted wall. With a few more quick strikes, the ghoul splat into dead ectoplasm. I spread my hands while gazing at the lich,

"It got the job done, didn't it?"

"I suppose, but there is magic that can make you far more deadly than whatever that is you wield currently."

I shrugged, "You know, it's a work in progress."

The lich scoffed, "Oh, I beg to differ. Your magic, as is, is more representative of a lack of progress."

I frowned, "Well, I haven't had a thousand years of experience, unlike some people."

"That's quite apparent."

I crossed my arms, "It's easy to criticize but hard to help. Can we just have the next beast come out?"

"Ah, certainly. And do take my teasing with a grain of salt. Your lack of knowledge is understandable, given your circumstances. Perhaps I shall give you a bit of a lesson later, should I find the time. Having an ally this...Ignorant, it implores me to fix the issue."

Another horror spilled out of the gateway, and I gave him a begrudging nod, "If you talk, I'll listen." I glared at the monster, "But this first."

The fighting continued, and I fell into a rhythm for it. By the time we finished the undertaking, a growing pool of blood filled the bottom of the colosseum. Disgusting me less than I'd like, I wallowed in it without much worry. The depth of the pool stagnated as my armor devoured many of the corpses, clearing the place out some.

But, blood still flowed like floodwaters. At one point, I even splashed it into one of the creature's eyes. Torix applauded my creativity there. By the time I finished, I gained thirteen levels of experience. I put points after getting all those levels as it allowed me to change the order than I gained perks.

I wanted the per level bonuses right then and there, so I put ten points into dexterity then the rest into perception. That gave me just shy of enough for the level twenty perception perk. I opened the perk menu, checking out the benefits once more.

[Masterful(Dexterity of 30 or more) - Your dexterity is a monument to potential. Adds extra balance, reaction time, and physical control per level. Each point in dexterity adds 5 points of health. Movement of any kind requires half as much thought and focus for their execution. Double's stamina consumption.]

[Effortless(Dexterity of 25 or more) - Your dexterity is incredible. Adds another 1/10th of dexterity to perception. Doubles effects of physical oriented skills. Body weight and armor no longer affect balance.]

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

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

[Discerning(Perception of 15 or more) - Your perception is excellent. Double's comprehension bonuses.]

Before I selected my perks, Torix paced up,

"Are you allocating your resources? Don't. Let me see your choices first. Allow me to console you."

I nodded and showed him the perk screen. His eyes flared, "You've already gained the perks for endurance, constitution, and strength, I presume?"

"Yup."

"Then don't put your next leveling point into dexterity. You've already quadrupled your stamina consumption. Any veteran will tell you about the setbacks that too many leveling perks will give you."

I frowned, "I'm not that worried about it. I just fought for a while just now, and I'm fine. I'm pretty sure I can handle it."

Torix shook his, "At this point, certainly. For most, investing a perk point into a single leveling perk is all they can do. That is, until they unlock the endurance trees. Then some choose another leveling perk, further doubling stamina consumption. Anymore stamina consumption simply isn't feasible."

I spread my hands, "The thing is, I have a tree called Determinator. It doubles my regeneration and enhances my endurance and willpower dramatically. Stamina consumption isn't an issue because of that."

Torix's eyes narrowed, "Would you mind showing the tree to me?"

I opened the tree menu along with the skills required for it. Torix crossed his arms after reading it, "I must say, that's quite the interesting tree. It explains a lot of your combat tendencies and why you rely on regeneration so much."

I put my hands on my hips, grinning, "Yeah. I put everything into endurance because I didn't want to die. It gave me a lot of rewards."

Torix leaned towards my status, "It's quite interesting, actually. You know, normally, a person won't invest heavily into endurance. It is an attribute that enables other attributes to shine. By itself, it does very little. With this tree, however—"

He pointed at my status screen, "There's a sort of loophole you could take advantage of. Attributes feed one another, and they exist as two chains. One of those chains begins with endurance, the other begins with constitution. If you feed points strictly into endurance, you should be able to hyperinflate your attribute growth."

I listened as Torix grabbed his chin, "The more I read of this tree, the more strange it appears. If you had spawned in the tutorial as all other sentients had, you'd have been forced to take Fledgling and Beginner. That alone makes this Determinator tree impossible to obtain. It's bonuses far exceed a normal tree as well."

I pursed my lips, "Eh, I guess I have Baldag-Ruhl to thank for that. In a twisted sort of way, you could even call me lucky."

"No. You were quite unfortunate. Your luck must be below five."

"It's three."

"That explains why you were chosen instead of your friend then. With that tree though, you'll be able to invest in as many as three leveling perks for both the physical and mental attributes. I invested my leveling perks into willpower, intelligence and charisma. It's an unstandard setup for a mage."

Torix raised a hand, "Most mages prefer perception over charisma. I wanted to lead armies, however. Why fight with one when you may fight with many, after all. Even if they are undead, a high charisma can shake the risen souls from their slumber. The leveling perks for intelligence and charisma both doubled then redoubled my mana costs."

Torix tapped his cheek, "I can't afford doubling my mana costs further. No one has found a way around this. I maxed out dexterity and constitution thereafter. That layout matched my goals of becoming an immortal scholar. It's the generally accepted build for mages."

I leaned back, "Why, exactly?"

"You have the two regeneration stats, willpower and endurance. They gauge and control six of the other attributes, three a peice. For willpower, it controls charisma, perception, and intelligence. For endurance, there's strength, constitution, and dexterity."

"What about luck?"

"That is the only attribute that no one truly understands outside of Schema. Many a scholar have tried dissecting how Schema affects such an ephemeral quality. None have succeeded so far."

Deep in thought, Torix pushed up an imaginary pair of glasses, "You could gain leveling perks in all the attributes. That, in itself, can set you apart from others. It won't make you into an outright anomaly, but it shall put you far ahead of most. Combine that with this armor of yours, and you carry an enormous potential, child."

He put a hand on his shoulder, "Do use it wisely."

I looked down at my hands, "You really think so, huh?"

He walked off, "Yes, I do. It's quite fascinating, peeking at your build. It was designed as if someone aimed to make it as powerful as possible."

The cavern echoed as bats died in the distance. I listened and said, "That's because Baldag-Ruhl's the one that set it up. I'm guessing he was trying to make himself as strong as possible. In the end, his success became mine."

"Count your blessings, then."

My stomach rumbled as hunger spiked in my chest. I sighed, "Thanks for the info and all, but I'm starving. Let me go kill one of the bears real quick."

Torix opened another portal, reminding me of space. Tiny glints sat in a pool of liquid darkness, and Torix willed out a clear pouch full of milky liquid. He tossed it towards me, "I own many of these rations. Use this to alleviate some hunger before you go on your hunt."

I caught the milky liquid, peering at it, "How would I eat it?"

"Simply tear the pouch and pour it onto your face. It shall absorb through your skin."

My skin crawled at the thought, but I tried it before dismissing the gift. I lifted the pouch in front of the eye slit of my helm. When I opened it, the liquid poured onto my face and disappeared into my skin as quickly as it landed. I shook my face as my hunger dissipated. It left a dry, earthy scent lingering behind.

I blinked, wondering if poisons were this quick to absorb. I gawked at the empty package, "What is this?"

"That is an edible container you may eat or toss out. The actual rations were found on a desert planet I passed by while researching water magic. Interesting places, desert worlds. You'd think you'd find the most information on water in worlds dominated by vast seas, but no. Any desert world I've visited, they cherished water, even worshipped it. Alas, that is a story for a different time."

He closed the different warp, "These pouches were quite helpful for keeping me satiated during my travels throughout numerous worlds. They are very efficient. No chewing. No swallowing. Just consume and move along your way."

I looked at the packaging before trying a bite. Tasteless and melting in my mouth, it acted as Torix said. Contemplating the uses for this stuff, it saved me a lot of time. Thinking about it, most people spent about three hours a day preparing, eating, and gathering food. If I ate this stuff day in and day out, it would give me those hours for other tasks.

For now, that meant training myself up and handling my business faster. I spread out my arms, "Torix, how much of that stuff do you have, exactly?"

Torix pressed a temple with two fingers, "Hm, much more than I'll ever need. I bought it in bulk when I visited the planet, and I ended up becoming a lich soon thereafter. I still haven't found a use for it after all this time."

I pointed a thumb at my chest, "Do you mind if I take it?"

Torix scoffed, "All of it? For free?"

I swiped a hand, "The thing is, you're having to handle my training right now. If I save time, you save time too."

Torix let out a laugh before shrugging, "Why not?"

He tossed me a few more bags, "I'll keep giving them to you until you're sick of them."

I gave Torix a nod, "Yeah, I'll see how long I can hold out. Thanks."

Torix brushed me aside, "Yes, yes, now handle your status."

I put perk points into Effortless and Masterful. Finalizing them, my body altered once more. In one way, my movements no longer required thought. I moved around for a while, finding my body shifting with fluidity and grace. Even difficult and complex combinations of punches required no effort in my mind.

My body obeyed me, made to be mastered. My nimble hands and fingers shifted like water. My feet and legs skid over the ground with masterful balance. Even my eyes and neck shifted with resounding clarity. I smiled while trying out a few acrobatic stunts. I did a somersault before trying to front flip.

I flopped onto my back, not pulling my legs in properly. I spread out my hands and legs as Torix cackled in the distance. Perks or no perks, skills mandated practice. Pushing myself up, I ran for a bit. All of the physical activities mounted, and a familiar tug pulled on my lungs and legs. They burned from being tired.

In a way, the fatigue refreshed my mind some. Weird as that was, I compared it to space travel. Sure, weightlessness was novel at first, but losing levity lost its charm after a while. I missed being tired in much the same way.

It wasn't an issue yet, as I could punch for a while before facing exhaustion. The Determinator tree helped stop the issues I'd otherwise face. Finding myself finished relishing in the power spike, I glanced at my attribute and character screen. I hit level one hundred.

Level 100 Attribute Menu

Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [30] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [10] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [19]

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health - 1,677/1,677 | Health Regen - 352.4/min | Stamina - 1,040/1,040 | Stamina Regeneration - 30/sec | Damage Resistance - 96% | Mental Resistance - 96% | Physical Power - (+)327% | Damage Increase - 5% | Evolution - 1,679,254/2,000,000

Every stat in the character screen increased some, though not by an enormous amount. The main change happened outside the screens and menus from the per level bonuses. My mental resistance capped out though, and my armor closed in on the next evolution. After another few hours of fighting Torix's summons, the armor grafted onto me would change.

I didn't know how to feel about that. I shook off a sense of unease before my eyes set forward,

"Let's continue the training then."

Torix crossed his arms, "You don't have to pretend you're not tired, child. I can feel the mental exhaustion oozing from you. We can wait for you to recover."

I shook my head, "I'm good. I can keep going."

Torix sighed before resting his face in his palm, "What force is compelling you to do this and at this frenetic pace?"

I furrowed my brow, "I don't know."

"So why do it?"

Standing there for a moment, Torix let me collect my thoughts. I raised a fist a few seconds after,

"I mean, I spent my entire life getting dragged around. I had to go to school. I had to wake up at a certain time. I even had to think about a steady job. It's different now. I get to choose what I'm doing right here and right now. Everytime I think about that, it's motivating as hell."

I rolled my fingers into fists, "So yeah, I want to keep going. Why? Because I can. Because I'm choosing to."

Torix leaned back, raising his hands up, "Oh, *well now*, it appears we have someone special on our hands."

I frowned, "Thanks for the sarcasm, but I'm not special. I'm motivated. There's a difference."

His eyes flared for a moment before Torix gestured towards one of the tunnels leading out, "I've amassed a pile of BloodHollow's cretens for you and your armor. Feast on them before returning. It shall save me a few minions."

I narrowed my eyes, surprised that Torix got what he wanted. He worked in a little break for me while wrapping it up in ironclad logic that I couldn't deny. A curt nod later, I passed through the tunnel, sprinting full pace. Finding an army of undead pacing over, they carried the corpses of bats and bears.

My armor went through the rounds of eating them before I returned back an hour later. As I did, Torix peered at me, "Ah, you're back already. Let us presume your training once more."

He opened his horror portal again. Torix looked down at me, his chin raised, "Let's see just how long this *perseverance* of yours lasts then."

The portal rippled, a rumbling sound echoing out. A small part of me wanted to slink back into normalcy where I could relax and let go. A growing part of me, one filled with ambition, desired something more. That fuel gave me an energy I'd never known, and I wielded this growing momentum for all it was worth.

Before Schema, I was no one. Now, I could be somebody. I glared forward, ready to make it happen.

One cracked skull at a time.

20 The Evolution

From the gaping portal, a twisted, gnarled mass of branches and roots crawled outwards. The monster of bark and wood expanded in my vision, thousands of empty eyes staring at me from its spiny body. At the tree's center, the trunk caved in, creating teeth of wood. It twitched as it squirmed, more like an insect than a beast.

It's size and stature dwarfed me. From the eyes, a hallucinating aura ebbed. Torix spawned something with a much higher level than me. Proceeding with caution, I inspected the creature.

Corrupted Treant(lvl 150) - Once a member of sentient plants, this being has fallen from grace. Where it once basked in the sun, it now squirms in the shade. The treant race fought against the dominant species of their planet and won. They enslaved the humanoid race, ruling over them for hundreds of years.

The treants' opinions split, one side for the continued enslavement and the other against it. Much like wars throughout your species' history, a civil war erupted between the two opinions. This particular treant was a nameless soldier, a member of the treant force siding for enslavement.

With hundreds of roots and branches, this treant pummels targets with innumerable blows from above and below. It strengthens in darkness and grows weaker in sunlight, designed as an assassin for other treants.

Be careful of its onslaught of attacks, or else you will be overwhelmed.

I rolled my shoulder, ready to test my new found agility. The monster whipped a wooden branch towards me, the air hissing as it gained speed. I shot towards the attack, dodging by a hair underneath it. That hair's breadth extended far beyond what it once was. The distance no longer unnerved me, saving me time and energy with my movements.

All this, I gathered from the wind of its attack. Seven more strikes lashed out towards me, but I slipped past them, moving just enough to dodge. I wasted no movement, no lapses in my balance holding me back. Weaving around the onslaught of strikes, Torix gave me a begrudging nod,

"It always amazed me, watching a warrior fight with all three attributes unlocked. Any one I watched who did so, couldn't maintain it for long. With how subtle and slight your movements are, you might be able to extend your stamina further than most."

A reluctant grin traced my lips as I closed the distance between the treant and I. Knees bent, I kept my arms close to my sides. My jaw clenched square while my chin tucked down. A tentacle

of wood lashed towards me, but I tilted my body. It swished past my face before I shifted around three more strikes.

The speed of the encounter left my mind reeling and unable to catch up. Despite the disorientation, my body reacted in time. Instinct and reflexes controlled me, letting me evade several strikes each second. Whipping towards the wood, I landed my first punch. Chips of wood splintered as force traveled down my wrist, into my shoulders, and back into my heels.

The connection point locked in without any wasted energy. As with all strikes, the impact blew back into my arm, and I almost fell backwards from it. The timing of the swing, the angle of the blow, even the way I braced myself, it came together like cogs in an oiled machine. The impact timed so cleanly that my heels left tiny cracks in the stone beneath me. The echo of the blow was like shattering a bottle full of thunder.

But this monster survived with ease. As the next vine snapped towards me, I sank a fist into the beast's lower bark. My fist's rebound blew back into my shoulders. It pushed my back like I wielded bombs in each hand.

The snapping vine sank into the rock in front of me. The blowback dodged the attack for me. Lucky me, as I lost my focus for a second, staring at my hands. I marveled at them and the destructive potential therein.

The density of my armor stopped my bones from crushing, even as I slid back from my hits. My skills came together by then, and the wood smashed to ruin at my touch. I gazed up at the treant, shifting wood and toothy bark raging. I grinned as it sliced four of those tendrils at me.

I whipped out four rapid strikes in quick succession. Each attack cleaved off branches with momentous impacts. Spilling sap and sawdust poured out in each direction, splattering onto my face. Splinters inched into my hands, but the monster reeled back, surprised by my retaliation.

It reassessed its position, trying to come up with a plan. I came at the creature, dashing towards it before it could. I snapped out my punches like a volley of sonic bursts, tearing through its tentacles. I overwhelmed it for a moment, chopping wooden vines with my fists. After rupturing a few more branches, the tree's sap came to life.

The beast's eyes locked in on me, and the tan ooze coursed over me. It created a solidifying gunk, congealing into a mass of amber. I solidified before it reared its branches back. A hailstorm of spears, the branches came at me. They tore through my armor, sinking in several inches before roots expanded out.

However, they left cracks in the stony amber. I shattered my confines, grabbing several clusters of roots. The maw of my armor opened, and it bit through the barky mass. Jerking the roots from my chest, the roots writhed in my hands before I squished them.

I grunted out from my nose, blood spitting out onto the ground beneath me. The twenty foot tall behemoth ripped out several more vines, but I mastered my countering already. I pressed it back before it reached the colosseum's wall. Torix protected it with a shield of mana, keeping the runes intact.

Not needing to hold back, I pressed the tree into that barrier. It opened its toothy trunk and squealed out. It snapped those jaws at me, but I bit back with my hands. I crushed its teeth. I snapped vines to slop. I burst eye after eye of the horrid beast, approaching it like a guillotine racing towards an exposed neck.

Each root that came within my grasp, I eviscerated. Every vine that squirmed near me, I sheared. Every branch that attacked, I retaliated with an unwieldy force. The monster pushed itself up the wall, scrambling for further distance. It found none.

It fell sideways and timbered down. It pierced the ground, creating a barrier I couldn't leave. I glared at it on the ground, "Come on. Who's trapped in here with who?"

I pulverized the tree with gauntleted fists. As the tree monster died, chunks of wood and splinters littered the ground. Torix nodded his head in approval, "It's rather interesting how well your blows connect. It creates a kinetic blowback that's intense. Perhaps you could use it for evasion and such?"

I clanked my fists together, and they bounced back, "That's a good idea, just like this training. I mean, if I'm honest, I can't believe I'm having fun with this." I spread out my hands, "But I am."

Torix nodded before snapping his fingers. In an instant, the blood dissipated. The splinters dried, the wetness on my feet no longer pressing. Torix sneered, "Let's get that filth out of the way. It was beginning to congeal. Grottesque."

I gawked at the visual transition, "You...Wow, that happened faster than I could blink." My armor bent out to consume the tree. Laying beside the treant, I raised a brow, "So, what kind of magic was that?"

"It was a basic cleaning magic, one that works off of known Schema algorithms. It combines silent casting, the perk for thirty intelligence, and some complex computations offloaded to my status. Interestingly, that kind of spatial warping is highly advanced, and I'm not particularly capable of it."

Torix raised a finger, "Schema is, so I lean on him to ease that somewhat. That being said, it only works for cleaning debris. It's an efficient spell for saving time, something Schema has many tools to assist with, should you use them."

I listened, opening my status, "How would I get something like that?"

Torix's eyes flared green, "Credits."

"So money?"

"Something you likely have very little of. Worry not, as you'll obtain these utility spells without needing to hunt them out directly. For now, your primary concerns should be building up your own offenses and creating multi-layered defenses. For instance, your mental resistance should be heightened as much as possible."

Sitting cross legged, I put my hands on my knees and leaned forward, "Any reason why?"

"Mind magic. It's difficult to learn, but it's highly effective on anything that can be reasoned against. One day, you may come to rely on it."

"Well, it's good my armor helps me out there."

Torix tilted his head, "Wait...The armor affects other resistances besides physical ones? How is that even possible?"

I shrugged, "No idea, but it definitely does. It raises the resistance cap and everything."

Torix grinned, his teeth yellow as parchment, "Then understanding these ruins has become my new priority."

He snapped his fingers and a chair formed beneath him, more a writhing shadow than a seat. It held him up as he leaned close to the runes. After a few moments, he shook his head in distaste,

"Every time I glance at this, my understanding of it lessens. Questions are answered with even more questions. Gah, I never held much talent in this particular field, and now it's a point of contention for me."

Torix leaned back into his chair, "This will take...time. A long time."

Before replying, I placed three points into intelligence. Unlike before, it no longer affected my mind. Instead, the intelligence pulled my flesh together. The density of the arcane bonds in my blood and bones thickened. It acted like a magical pressure, a center of gravity holding me together.

I raised my hands, a subtle red aura spilling out. My air conditioner hands pulled at the arcane bonds within me, disintegrating sinews and tissues alike. Using magic tore apart the basic bonds that the mana created within me. In essence, I sacrificed my body for the magic I casted, and it didn't fatigue my mind as much.

Instead, I converted my body into magic. At that point, I pulled at those mana chains holding me together. A painful surge ushered out from my hand, the red aura spilling out. Like leaving my

hand on a stove, I jerked it back and winced, more out of surprise than pain. I clamped my fist, killing the cast quickly. A notification echoed out.

Breakthrough achieved! Apprentice level unlocked for Arcane Blood Manipulation

(lvl 1) ----> (lvl 26)

I tilted my head, "Torix, have you ever heard of breakthroughs?"

He waved me off as he stared at a jagged character on the wall, "Of course. They aren't that uncommon."

"Alright, cool. Can you spawn another monster?"

"Sure, sure."

The cycle continued like this for a while. Torix spawned abomination after abomination, and with my improved dexterity, I ripped them apart. He kept them around the same level as the treant, slowing my level gain, but we achieved the level we aimed for. Popping up in my status, our real goal's completion cropped up.

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

My hand lingered over the notification. Memories of the armor and how it terrified other people rushed into my mind. The horror of the feelers of my armor filled my chest, making me itch for a moment. I even envisioned Michael and Kelsey disgusted with me. My hand hovered over the no option for a while.

Before I pressed down, other thoughts ran into my mind. I remembered the plasma knife coming at my throat and my armor saving me. My armor helped me at pivotal times, making a huge difference for me. More than anything, my fears guided me.

My eyes widened as nightmarish imagery flooded into my head. Kelsey and Michael gurgling on their own blood. My body swelled and split as monsters infested under my skin. I covered my mouth, overwhelmed by those possibilities. After I collected myself, I put my hand over the notification once more.

I selected the yes icon.

There would be no more heading back any longer. I trembled as my armor clasped deeper into my body. I grabbed the sides of my head, stumbling backwards as Torix turned to me, "What's going on? Is something in your eye?"

I writhed as thousands of needles from my armor stabbed deeper until they reached my bones. I scream out, the sheer torment unbearable. It flashed in my vision, a wave of torment. All became pain once more. I could do nothing but convulse on the ground.

Torix paced over, recognizing something was off, "Daniel, what's happening? I'm about to sedate you if you don't calm down."

I thrashed on the ground, grabbing the sides of my skull. Every inch of me burned like I dove into a pit of magma. A pit of acid. Of fire. Of pure pain. My flesh eviscerated as the armor squirmed deeper, tearing into bones. In a panic, Torix created a green ring above me, lined with incantations. He generated a spell with his giant tome.

"I'm taking you to a healing center. You'll be responsible for the payments thereafter."

I raised a hand, gasping, "Evolution."

His eyes flared bright, "Oh...That's what this is. Then, I suppose you simply must bear through it. I shall stay here until it is over."

The pain lessened, and it allowed me to think again. My armor kept eating my flesh for an undetermined amount of time. When it finally stopped, I laid in a pool of my own blood and sweat. I stared at the ceiling, not knowing what happened. I turned towards Torix.

He sat on the ground, reading a dusty, ancient book. I glanced back at the ceiling. Lamps made of mana kept the room lit, along with Torix's shambling zombies. I rolled onto my front. As I did so, I noticed my gauntlets. They were smoother, more like skin. An intense, red light reflected off the stone floor from my helmet's slit.

Despite its radiance, the red glow left my eyesight unaltered. Laying there, Torix turned to me. He closed his book, "Ah, you're awake. Finally."

I pushed myself upright, wobbling onto my knees. Torix grabbed one of my arms, steadying me. He mouthed, "Come now. You've just undergone some sort of agonizing transition. Surely standing so soon benefits you little."

I shook my head, nothing hurting. If anything, my mind cleared and my body strengthened. I took a deep breath, trying to breathe out that experience. My expression numbed, "Ah...That was awful."

"I appeared like something atrocious, most certainly. It appeared as though your armor blended the body beneath it. To what end? I've no idea."

I got my bearings, and Torix let me stand on my own. I opened my status screen, inspecting the results of that spine chilling experience.

II 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.

0/4,000,000 Mana left till next evolution.

Effects:

A Harbinger's Might - Increases Damage reduction cap by 1.5% | Current Max: 96.5%

Shell of Eldritch - Additional 10% increase to total health | Current Total Health: 110%

The Walking Calamity - Gives unique ability Oppression | Current Damage: (6000 + 20% of your health/min) within a 120ft radius

Abhorred - Decreases Charisma by 10% | Current Total Charisma: 90%

- From a different world I rise. We usher forth creation through ruin. Our might is our union, our hunger a weapon. All crumbles in our wake.

These bonuses accentuated my bulk and longevity, but having an attribute lowered, well, it sucked. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't matter much. I planned on increasing my charisma to over thirty, get the leveling perk, then not worry about further investment. So, despite the hit to charisma, the battle bonuses more than compensated.

The last lines of the armor gave me chills, however. It spoke as if two people existed, me and my armor. The metal reacted to its environment, even showing emotions with its wicked grinning. Evolutions might strengthen that personality, but whether that rang true in the future, only time would tell.

Centering back in the moment, I turned towards Torix, "Alright, let's continue the training."

Torix raised a hand to me, "You've risen to a suitable level of strength now. There's really no need to be fearful any longer, as you've filled out your combat perks for the most part. You should go find a nearby dungeon. The cores are simply obtained, and can be exchanged for powerful artifacts. You'd be gaining resources rather than depleting mine as well."

I put my hands on my hips, "Huh. When you're right, you're right. Any pointers for where dungeons could be?"

Torix gestured around, "Look for any nearby physical features of interest, as there will likely be a dungeon of some sort there. The more extraordinary the feature, the more likely a dungeon

exists of a high level. Considering the brevity of your world's systemization, the monsters will be easily dealt with."

"You make it sound like they'll get stronger."

"They will. Much, much stronger, in time. This dynamic creates a power curve. Should you fall behind it, you will be at the monster's mercy. If you stay ahead of it, you will gather immense resources. This has and always will create a feast and famine way of life for anyone in Schema-owned space."

He turned towards me, "You lie well ahead of this curve because of your unique circumstances."

I flexed my arms, "Hell yeah."

Torix's fire eyes rolled in his head, "Do keep the bragging contained to those that will be impressed. Now, as unlikely as they may be, do be aware of scavengers or scouts from various guilds. They will target you as an unknown. Your death is mere experience to them. Also, that aura, you may wish to use it only when necessary. It sterilizes your surroundings, leaving notable traces of your presence."

I gave him a nod, "Alright, sure thing. Anything else?"

He placed his hands behind himself, "You wish for more advice?"

"Absolutely. You know what you're talking about."

His eyes flared red for a second, and the lich coughed into a hand, "I-I do pride myself in my knowledge. It's good you can see the value in it. For now, there's nothing else you need to know. Good luck with your dungeon delving."

I left out of the BloodHollow, pacing past the undead and the Sentinel. Once in the sun, I stretched out my arms. The smell of rich earth, fresh wind, and sun baked trees refreshed me. The sunshine warmed my armor while the soft grass cushioned my feet. Man, I loved and love nature.

Speaking of nature, I opened my minimap to remind myself of my surroundings. A few places like Pier's Creek or Red Hill came to mind, but they loomed in the shadow of the Evergreen Ravine. The fifty mile trench cut a path through the hills and caves, hosting pine trees on both its sides.

I mentioned trees because they didn't grow outside of the ditch. The water level raised as you went deeper in the ravine, some spots even holding a few natural springs. They stayed in tiny grottos spread throughout, but that let the larger plantlife thrive. Michael and I visited there several times.

Michael helped me out each time because he lived in the woods with a camper's family. They went towards all kinds of landmarks, and that's why Michael and I went caving in the first place. I frowned, wondering where the guy was. Peering down at my armor for a second, I regretted evolving it.

That passed as I imagined the monsters I'd fight in the future. Going into that future, I sprinted towards the Evergreen Ravine. My feet tore clumps out of the earth as I ran. The wind pressed against my armor with a comforting cool. Birds sang songs in trees while I passed by wildflowers of all kinds.

Baneberries, bee balms, and bloodroots littered the forest floor. Mushrooms marked rotting logs, and Pier's creek shined towards the sky like beaten silver. Keeping my pace high, I traversed twenty miles of the forest. As I did, less wild game roamed the area. Deers stayed on edge, guarded and afraid. The squirrels darted away long before neared them, and even birds flew off.

Wondering what was up, I spotted species I didn't recognize in the woods. I wasn't exactly a pro or anything, but anything unusual caught my eye. Some of the plant life near caverns carried the bioluminescence I came to expect from dungeons. If anything, the rifts leaked out with new wilderness.

Those batches of oddness kept me entertained until I found the beginning of the Evergreen Ravine. As I closed in, the trees and forest gave way to a hill. I paced up the slanted plain before reaching an overlook. Even a cursory glance confirmed my guess. Schema transformed the pine forest into a thriving jungle, wild and shaded like an emerald in sunlight.

Flowers of all kinds bloomed in that vibrant green, bright and beautiful. Batches of glowing orange and yellow lined the tops of trees. These shining fruits lit the forest as I jumped down into the expanse. Sliding down the stiff cliffs, I got my first good look at the forest floor.

Glowing wildlife created pockets of light in the shadowed darkness. I paced around before a hulking lizard walked out. Lean, muscular, and powerful, its muscles rippled under its scaled skin as it walked. Orange stripes lined its sanguine sides. Black drool leaked from its mouth like motor oil.

It locked eyes with me. We stood as predator and prey for a moment, not knowing who was who. Making a decision, it roared at me, four rows of teeth lining the bottom and top of its mouth. Its legs lifted out from its body, hobbling sideways as it charged me.

Nearing me, I slammed my fist into its face. It blew back while the ground gave way beneath me. Armored, orange plates cracked around its head, and the eyes of the creature opened wide. Those eyes pulsed as veins bulged in the iris's of its eyes. The bull sized lizard charged me once more, its tail swinging back and forth.

I tucked in, keeping my arms close. I walked towards the beast with patience. It snapped forwards, the disgusting maw gaping open. I lifted my foot onto its bottom jaw as I grabbed the creature's tusks with both hands. With a quick stomp, I ripped off its jaw before shoving it aside.

The bloody jaw crushed under my foot, and the creature stumbled into the ground. Gurgling while its tongue flopped in all directions, I lifted my right hand and struck the creature's head. Bone cracked, flesh tore, and skin split. With a few mauling strikes, the creature fell limp. Curious about it, I rubbed my left hand against the creature's plates, marveling at it.

It was a bonafide dinosaur, and according to my calculations, dinosaurs were awesome.

I culled a few more of the lizards after that. They stood no chance, my level too high for them to really take me down. I got into a rhythm that way, and in that sort of haze, a whistling entered my ears. The squealing sound gave way to a wet gush, pain roaring up my chest.

I spit out a bit of blood, a metal harpoon slicing straight through my chest. It lodged me into the ground, my vision jerking down. I peered around before another spear sliced straight into my hand like nailings through wood.

The deafening crack registered in my ears this time, and I turned to the sound. In the distance, a thin, lithe figure wore a suit of metallic armor. Nestled between glowing fauna, the armored person aimed a massive gun at me, a clip of harpoons resting above the barrel. Clear cases full of red goop pumped the crimson liquid into the individual.

It pulled a trigger along the side of the gun, a spear chinking into place. As it did, tubes siphoned the red fluid straight into the figure's arms, shoulders, and chest. The armor's mechanized hydraulics glided smooth as snakeskin when she aimed at me.

Crack.

Fast as a lightning bolt, a lance plunged into my other hand, pinning me down. The recoil of the rifle lobbed straight into a momentum sink in the back of the gun. It hissed steam, and the individual pulled another spear, aiming it at my face. I glared at her, and Schema gave me her inspection.

Althea Tolstoy | Unknown | Level 123 - Althea is a scout working for a dark, powerful force. She's receiving training in a newly formed world where someone is attempting to turn her into a powerful fighter. Her unknown status makes the resulting bounties irrelevant, as she's already rewarding to kill.

My eyes widened as I gritted my teeth. She used me for training, huh? I clenched my hands onto the spears pinning me down. Jerking them from the ground, I stood up with the third lance sliding out of my chest. Sliding the spears out of my hand, I reared an arm back, harpoon in hand.

Throwing the lance with a burst of effort, the scout rolled sideways. The rod stuck into the ground as I reared my other arm back, the other spear above my head,

“Where do you want it? Through your chest or through your face?”

21 Althea Tolstoy

She ran into some bushes before I tossed the spike where she hid. The metal left my hand, and I blistered towards her with clumps of grass flying off the back of my feet. I crashed into the greenery, but the scout disappeared. Resounding through the bushes, another destructive detonation of sound boomed in the distance.

A tree beside me splintered as another harpoon disappeared into the soil below. I gawked at the impaled dirt, grimacing at the damage done. Hustling toward the source of the sound, I broke branches, the bark bouncing off my face. The plants obscured my vision while vines whipped my chest. Losing track of her, the forest silenced.

Another lance pierced through the woods, sinking beside my foot. Racing towards the source of the sound, I pounded my heels into the forest floor, briars and bushes slowing me even further. The terrain fought me harder than she did. Popping into my vision, Althea’s cannon ejected the heavy, kinetic bouncer in the back.

The steel sank into the dirt as she pulled out a smaller tactical rifle from the cannon’s insides. The barrel flashed as shots zipped my way. The bright, red flashes dug straight into my chest. Pain exploded out like a hornet's nest. Skin seared as my flesh cooked. Ignoring the discomfort, I wove back and forth, moving my head in a chaotic flow. She remained calm, standing her ground and firing burst after burst at me.

I quit moving my head and shifted my body instead. Getting turned into swiss cheese while closing the distance, I changed tactics. I hid behind a boulder, waiting for my wounds to regenerate. I inspected the holes in my chest, finding no rounds left in me. Based on the red flashing, her rifle fired some type of energy munition.

It hurt like wildfire, but it inflicted little damage. Even when we met, her first few shots immobilized me, but they missed my vitals. Given her accuracy now, she chose debilitation over bloodshed. She aimed at taking me back towards her employers or something worse.

Interrupting my thoughts, whizzing rounds stabbed into my boulder barricade. Powdered rock floated in the wind as she walked around the stone towards me. Staying in place, I pulled my arm forward. I clapped my elbow into the rock, chunks of it falling out. Grabbing an armful, I waited for her to change her angle of attack.

She maintained a wide girth while closing the distance. I waited until she got near my side of the rock barrier before running out the other side. Right before stepping into her view, I tossed a rock in the direction where she expected me to come out. Her reflexes snapped into action, and she tore through the boulder piece I tossed up.

It disintegrated before I barreled towards her. She aimed at me right as I chucked another rock at her. The sharp piece snapped into her helmet, breaking several tubes leading towards her neck. She pulled back while I dashed closer, but the jungle impeded her as it had impeded me. She aimed once more, and I threw a stone again.

It snapped into another tube, more red gunk spilling into the jungle. She scrambled for escape after a few aiming attempts. No longer walking into a firing range, I closed in on my dashing distance. As the crimson fluid leaked from her armor, her hands shook. She pulled out a syringe from her side and stabbed herself. It stabilized her, making her sprint and run faster.

She aimed back and fired quick bursts, tagging me. I ripped the underbrush apart on my way over, my health dwindling to half. One option showed itself, so I leaned below a burst of fire before pushing off my heels. I shot towards her, wind rushing past my helm. Her knees wobbled as she unloaded a full clip into my incoming chest. It burned and raged like fire, but I kept upright, reaching her. Grabbing the end of the rifle, I jerked the weapon from her grasp.

She let it go, punching at my head. Her fist smacked into my helmet, denting it and whipping my head back. I grimaced at the sheer power she held in her tiny frame. Stunned for a second, I stumbled back while getting my bearings. Worried of her rushing in, I kept my arms high. Instead of capitalizing on my vulnerability, she let me go. Peering at her, I discovered why.

The arm that struck me mangled into a broken mess of blood and steel. A series of spiral fractures eliminated her usage of the limb, and the metal crumbled with it. My armor outdid hers, so despite Althea's physical power, her bones shattered before mine did.

Taking the moment offered to me, I shook off my dizziness. I came in once more with a short jab. Althea reacted like lightning, tilted her head sideways. My fist brushed past her face as she countered my strike with her unbroken hand. She smashed a fist into my face, and my head bounced back as if running into a wall. My vision blurring, I buckled back, my knees wobbling.

I got my bearings, gawking at her in surprise. Her power and speed roared out like fury and fire. She aimed for strength and dexterity, her reaction times and power both first class. Taking another second, I let my health return to normal. My vision cleared, spots dissipating in my peripherals.

The armor over Althea hampered her regeneration, unlike mine. The twisted metal prevented her arms from reassembling. She heaved for breath from under her armor, both her arms resting on her sides and shattered beyond repair. Red fluid leaked from both of the broken tubes, no

longer giving her an artificial rush of adrenaline. The goo pumped out of the suit, and once I healed up, I closed in.

I ducked under her desperate punch before snapping a quick hook into her side. She keeled over, her armor denting. Chaining my strikes as a combination, I lobbed a heavy uppercut as she slumped down, her head whiplashing up. Glass cracked, and she stumbled away from me.

I lunged forward. She pulled out knives of red energy. She sliced at my throat, but I weaved between her slow slashes. Her broken arms refused to listen to her commands, all agility having left her. She compensated midfight, holding the blade backwards. Whipping the knives, she slashed right at my vitals. Deadly but predictable, I kept myself calm and stayed close.

Althea struggled on, her willpower keeping her conscious. I pressured her back, keeping my attacks light. In time, her strikes turned desperate and wild. She trembled and shivered. When she stumbled back, I charged towards her for the killing blow. Midway through my strike, she changed directions.

She bounced off her heels, and a loud clamp echoed in my ears. Debilitating misery thundered up my leg as something clamped onto my foot like a viper's fangs. I howled out as she bolted towards me. Lunging at my neck, her blade slid forward with a smooth agility.

The fumbling chaos of before formed into a ruthless rigidity in an instant.

She played me, and I fell right into the trap. This entire time, she baited me around, pretending like she worked off desperation alone. Even in the moment, I admired the plan. It required guts, effort, and tenacity. However, it lacked an awareness of my abilities.

Her knife sliced at my neck, but I cranked my face towards her arm. Like a monster from hell, my helmet split open and chomped onto her crumpled limb. Metal pierced soft flesh, a torrent of blood flowing into my helmet as her armor crumpled. Holding her like a pitbull, I jerked her back and forth before pulling her down.

She lost her balance, her body lighter than mine. The red knife of energy fell from her hand as a high-pitched voice screamed through her voice intercom. On the ground, I tore a chunk off her armor and forearm. She howled out before kicking at my injured leg. I ignored the pain, snapping her head back with a fist.

Her head bounced off the dirt, and she stopped moving as much. I peered down, finding my leg bit into by a bear trap. The metal teeth carried a laser-lined edge, the red glow intermingling with my blood. I closed my eyes, jerking the trap off my leg. The trap tore out chunks of flesh, cooking and cauterizing the wounds.

I winced at the medley of blood and metal my leg turned into. The crumbled, umbral steel kept my weight up like a spiral peg leg. My regeneration came into its own once the trap fell down. Unlike Althea's armor, mine reconstituted with my own health. Returning to normal, I grimaced before lifting the leg. No pain shouted back, so I turned back towards Althea.

I stomped down, bones in her legs cracking. She screamed, and I winced at the sound of it. Standing over her, I lifted my hand high. She pulled her arms up, "Stop! You don't want to do this."

Pausing for a second, I agreed with her. The two scavengers treaded farther from being human, but this woman sounded like a person. Like anyone I'd find on the street. That undue mercy of mine leaked into my words as I simmered,

"Why not? You tried killing me."

"I could've killed you with the first shot. I didn't."

I narrowed my eyes, keeping my fist high, "Start talking then."

"I-I'm here to scout. I was trying to take you back with me."

"Where?"

"I can't say."

I frowned, "That's convenient."

She wrenched under me, her body convulsing. She winced, "Get away from me."

Chips of glass fell from her helmet. A pair of deep, purple irises looked at me, fear stricken and panicked. My hand lowered to my side as I peered at her. I grimaced, "You're going to need to give me some answers."

Two thin veins grew over her irises. An eerie feeling raced up my spine. Her voice deformed, "Get. Away. Now."

Fear laced her voice, not towards herself but for me. The vibrant red mixture she pumped herself with mixed with my blood beneath us. I dipped my hand into it, rubbing it into my finger tips. It numbed wherever my skin touched. Slingsing it off, I raised a brow down at her.

The goo anesthetized instead of invigorated.

I stood myself up before her body splintered under her helmet. A black tentacle shot out of her face mask and grabbed my neck. Like a tendril of steel, the limb lifted me upward. Other vines of black extended from her metal shell, rooting into the ground. As I rose up, her mechanized armor bulged outwards, the metal squealing as it bent.

With a sharp pop, the metal ripped open, revealing horror. Eyes opened in sporadic places, glancing around in a frenzy. Her stomach opened, intestines writhing outwards. Her flesh reformed into arms and feet and teeth. The abomination kept growing from the power armor towards me.

I bit through the tentacle holding me with my helmet. As I landed on the ground, I rolled away before standing up. The mound kept expanding in all directions as I lowered my hands,

"What the hell's going on here?"

A ball of shadow radiated outwards before Torix walked from it. The lich gave the grotesque mass a knowing glance,

"What the hell indeed."

Torix reached out a hand, freezing the creature in place. His palm shook as he squeezed a fist. The mound of meat retracted back into the torn armor. It stabilized, revealing a woman underneath the once writhing mass. She laid there, sleeping in tattered clothing. The sight of her struck me - she contrasted the deformity like night from day.

Her eyes and hair shared the same shade of lavender. Her skin shone silver in shade, though it only glistened from sweat. She laid out in the sunshine like an amethyst in a silver ring. As I gawked, Torix scoffed,

"I suppose you are rather young. Perhaps you've never seen a woman's form before?"

I flushed under my helmet, "Of course I have, but come on man-" I pointed at her, "Having *that* come out of that hideous blob, it's, well, it's insane."

"Perhaps, but staring a little less would serve your dignity well."

Ignoring the jabs, I mouthed, "I wonder who she is?"

"We will discover that once she's been stabilized. Now-" Torix created a portal and shoved her into it, "Even a superficial glance exposes wells worth of eldritch energy oozing out of her. I've never seen anyone this contaminated with the eldritch yet still remain a system dweller."

Torix turned and faced me, “She is still an unknown, however. This reformation process explains the reasoning behind that well enough.”

My eyebrows raised, “Why do you think she changed into that glob?”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “That is precisely why I am here. Uncovering life’s mysteries, why, that is my most consistent source of enjoyment by far.”

Realizing Torix dived in from nowhere, I leaned back, “Speaking of mysteries, how and why are you here?”

Torix stared forward, “I sent several of my summons to monitor you after you left. They diverted portions of their consciousness towards me, giving me a view of you. I ensured you didn’t run off after I gave you so many resources.”

I put my hands on my hips, “You kind of found me from off this planet. I don’t think there’s a chance I can hide from you now that you’re on it.”

Torix’s eyes flared red, “I thought the same of my son, and look where that has left me.”

I frowned, his words piercing himself more than me. We watched the jungle of the Evergreen Ravine, taking a second for silence. Torix interlocked his hands behind himself,

“My emotions for that matter have been settled, but the lessons learned still shout in my mind. I knew Alfred was likely to have passed before I found him. I spread the grief of his demise out over decades, though the confirmation of his passing was still a blow.”

Torix grabbed his hands behind himself, “Alfred taught me caution and foresight, and now, they are my greatest strengths. Should I wield them, they shall guard me. Those lessons guard you now as well, and by Schema’s grace, you need it.”

Torix peered in every direction, “The energy signature from your stunt with Baldag-Ruhl is attracting other presences from across the stars. This scout is likely one of those interested parties, so I’m going to see what she knows. Perhaps some experimenting shall take place, should she prove that she isn’t useful in other ways.”

I winced at the thought. My eyes set where she was, “I know it’s not my place to say this, but she did try warning me about her transformation. I don’t think she deserves torture.”

Torix rolled his fiery eyes, “Hah, she forfeited her life the moment she tried taking yours.”

“She didn’t try to. She could’ve killed me if she wanted too.”

Torix shook his head, "That undue mercy of yours is far more grotesque than even this woman's body."

My eyes widened, "Would you say the same about me and my armor?"

Torix turned a palm to me, "Of course. If you allowed that eldritchian skin to overcome you thusly, then yes; I would say the same about you and your situation. You've contained it, however. She has not, and that makes all the difference."

I flinched, "You-you think I could end up like that?"

Torix lifted his chin, "Likely not, though I can never be too certain. In all honesty, your armor's stability is remarkable. Baldag-Ruhl's work exemplified a relentless pursuit of perfection. Whoever tampered with that scout acts as a potent opposite; they demonstrate amateurish chauvinism."

Torix sighed and peered down at me, "Regardless, I'm returning to BloodHollow. Do finish this dungeon and return forthrightly. I may have unlocked Miss Tolstoy's secrets by the time you arrive...Preferrably without torture."

Torix took off on his dark cloud of mana. I stared as he darted off with Althea. Lowering her chances of being tortured was about the best I could do for her. That repaid her for earlier.

Taking a breath, I shook off the jitters from the monster situation. Settling myself down, I slid down towards the bottom of the ravine again. Taking my mind off that dire situation, I met a few more komodo tigers. They offered little in the way of anything useful, including a good fight. They only gave me ambient mana, and by no means an enormous amount.

By comparison, the jungle itself was a wonder to behold. I picked a few of the stranger looking flowers and plants, hoping for maybe an alchemy or harvesting skill. Nothing happened, so I tried eating one of the glowing flowers. It burst out with a rancid mucus as I did. I spit it out, nearly throwing up. Vowing to never tell anyone about that, I marched onward.

I stumbled across a small cliff at the ravine's center. There, a giant red eagle lounged with orange wings scorching out fire. Its chest puffed out with pride at its own form, an innate majesty oozing from it. The breathtaking beast spent a bit too much time looking dominant instead of being dominant, however.

I got one of the spears I tossed at Althea earlier before chucking the bolt at the eagle. It snapped one of its wings into the ground, and I charged it right after. I shattered the pinned wing. Flopping with its talons and pecking with its beak, it left a scrape or two on me before I crushed it to bits.

With the dungeon core ready, I handled more of my business.

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

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

[Discerning(Perception of 15 or more) - Your perception is excellent. Double's comprehensive bonuses.]

After selecting Discerning, I finalized my choice. For the moment, nothing popped into place. I'd select the Beginner perk soon for the experience if no other perks showed themselves. It made me think about my quests. Not needing to complete them in one go, I ran back towards BloodHollow to cash in Schema's rewards.

While running back, I checked out my tree menu. I'd stockpiled 233 points, so I put them into the Obliterator tree. Amazingly, I got nothing from it. Even with just shy of 250 points in it, I gained nothing. That being said, all of the other trees distributed rewards at set intervals. If this tree worked like the others, it could reward something at the quarter mark of the tree's total, meaning 250.

Leveling towards that quarter mark took priority as I ran back towards BloodHollow. Noting the skill's utility against Althea, I trained my Throwing during my journey back. To level the simple skill, I ripped off branches and tossed them at pinecones or the middle of trees. I missed less often than I expected, my finesse a far cry from my pre-status self.

By the time I reached BloodHollow, I gained three points in Throwing and one point in Physical Fitness. While sitting outside BloodHollow's sheening doors, I placed my points into Obliterator. The satisfying ding of a notification rang in my ears along with the resulting rush.

An obliterator destroys, but all destruction ushers forth growth. The reason for that primordial principle is simple; for change to occur, the present must be wiped clean. An obliterator is the living omen of change for that reason. You bring that omen with you as well.

+1 attribute point per 5 levels. Effect is retroactive for all levels before 100.

The tree baffled any expectations I had prior. It gave me extra attributes permanently, and attributes always mounted to exceptional gains overtime. Ogling the bonuses for a moment, I took a moment to appreciate what this skill tree meant. If all four of the tiers acted like the first, I'd nearly double my attribute gain.

Combine that with my other trees, and my raw stat total exceeded others by leaps and bounds. Other people might get this same tree, however. In fact, there could be more people out there than me getting more trees at a lower level. If anything, families born into the system could pass down knowledge about what trees to unlock and when.

That knowledge might result in dynasties of individuals standing far over others. While ahead of normal people, I may not own an advantage over many of the elite out there in the stars. I smiled at the thought, the ceiling over me vast and infinite. Schema's universe seemed that way, and Torix acted as the reason I pondered these ideas in the first place.

The old lich opened my perspective to the world beyond my own. I'd repay him for that one day.

Snapping back into the real world, the attribute screen popped up. After rereading Obliterator's bonuses, I rubbed my temples in confusion. It worked for levels up until one hundred, meaning level ups from here on out wasted attribute gains from the tree. Of course, that assumed Obliterator kept giving the same style of reward for ascending ranks. All other trees acted like that, however, so I worked off that hunch.

Shifting my focus from leveling to skill gaining would grant me higher attributes in the long run. Considering the power of trees, focusing on leveling skills empowered me either way. Gaining attributes helped as well because of Obliterator's bonuses. Staring at those bonuses, twenty attribute points waiting for allocation.

I put a whopping seventeen points into intelligence, and three into perception. I gained the requirements for intelligence and perception's perks that way. Unlocking perks and perk points were different matters altogether, however. These attributes came from Obliterator, so I couldn't unlock these boons yet.

Getting those perks required dungeon delving for cores. After handling Torix's request, getting cores while training took priority. Arriving at BloodHollow, the sentinel and I exchanged some snappy words. I sprinted back towards the colosseum, trying to train different skills. Unsuccessful but still working on it, I arrived with Torix leaned over the scout's body.

Althea rested on a runic table. Innumerable devices of metal laid at Torix's side as he carved a small slit into her skin. I grimaced while walking up,

"I thought you said you'd avoid torture?"

He spoke between measured slices, "Always take heed of context clues, little one...Do you hear screaming, perhaps writhing or sweating?"

Peering at Althea, I shook my head. Torix used a bit of mana to clean some blood, "Therefore, the elements of torture aren't present. This is surgery, and I'm carving a stabilizing rune into her skin. Do you recall the armor she wore before?"

Those crumbled plates laid in a corner of the colosseum, the metal shattered beyond recognition. I squinted at the pile, "Yeah, I remember. I thought it pumped some kind of stimulant or something. It numbed my fingers on contact, and she pumped a lot of it in her all the time. I'm guessing that gunk kept her from turning into an abomination."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Wait...How did you guess all that?"

I tapped the side of my head, giving Torix a smile, "I took heed of the context clues therein." I interlocked my hands behind myself, pretending to be Torix, "You see, hm, the glass tubes busted behind her, hm, while I punched her, most indubitably. She started transforming rapidly, thereafter. Therein and therefore, I thus connected the two dots."

I dropped the facade, "Eh, it made sense, yuh know?"

Torix reached out his hand, giving me a telekinetic flick between my eyes. I rubbed the spot as Torix scoffed, "You deserve that for the taunting." He leaned back over, "Though it wasn't the worst impression I've heard of myself, so there's that."

I touched where the invisible flick made contact, "Hah. Thanks." Pacing over, I watched him work. He carved out tiny marks into her skin. He dabbed his instruments into pools of liquids, each colored a different shade. They carried varying consistencies, herbal and chemical smells wafting off each bowl.

The shining blue one reminded me of BloodHollow's cyan pools. The others differed in texture, smell, and appearance to the other pools in this cave. These liquids covered a variety of needles and other warped pieces of a silver metal. With all these colored pigments, Torix created the lines for a tattoo of runes. Torix reached out a hand,

"Would you mind being a part of an experiment of mine? The risks are rather low, and they should enable us to speak with this individual."

I crossed my arms, "Uh, sure. As long as it isn't anything crazy."

"Good. Give me your hand. I need your blood."

Hesitation ran through me before I reached out my hand. An aura of orange suffused Torix's hand, and he brought my palm over the shining blue bowl. Slitting my palm, he eased blood into

the bowl, and I winced, more out of habit than actual pain. Drops dabbled into the basin, changing the color of the mana to purple.

The bowl's contents reminded me of Althea's hair and irises, just brighter in shade. Torix leaned back from the saucer, "That is quite interesting. I imagined that her biology resulted from experiments with the eldritch. Her mind remains utterly uncorrupted by their influence, however."

Torix grabbed his chin with a hand, "It produced eldritch energy mixed with something else, and this production continues even when her mana is full. That oversaturation causes the energy to deform her." Torix tapped his chin as he said, "She's unconscious, and so her mana has ceased production. Once awake, she will need a conduit for stabilizing her."

Torix turned towards me as he said with a dark smile, "Do I have any volunteers?"