

## 17 Magic's Mark

The magically imbued scavenger shot out a bolt of violet lightning at me. Dipping behind the patch of vines, the lightning sunk into the greenery. Portions of the foliage disintegrated, patchy holes left of it. The other scavenger sprinted towards me, not even unsheathing his blade. The claw happy one snarled,

"You have to work on your aim."

The magic in the purple skeptile's hand shook with energy, "You're getting in the way. We have to kill this thing before that necromancer finds us."

I shouted back to them, "What necromancer, exactly?"

Instead of answering, the purple one unleashed his magic once more. I dove into the infested water, preferring raw sewage to death. Above, a flash of power coursed through the cavern. I pulled myself up to the other side, my eyes locked in on the wielder of lightning. The magenta lizard man channeled his energies while his bruiser friend jumped over towards me.

I snapped a jab at its mouth, and he slapped my fist sideways. Heavy and hard like stone, his hand actually moved my own. A quick jolt, I whipped a right cross straight at his chin. He landed on his feet before my fist hit his teeth. A few of them snapped as he wobbled back. I went forward, hitting him the stomach with a jab before he swiped at me.

I ducked beneath before whipping up. I hit him hard in his stomach, and the lizard man grunted as ribs cracked. He shoved me away while shouting,

"He's stronger than he looks. Kill him."

I moved my head at random, trying to be hard to hit. A coursing bolt whipped beside my head, striking stone and singing its surface. Lingering in place, the stone glowed yellow from the heat left behind. The green one charged me, taking his sword out.

Impatient and eager, he aimed right for my neck. I leaned away, and the blade struck one of my shoulder spikes. Sparks flooded the dim cavern, and his sword struck the concrete wall. It sunk in. I tackled the handle of the blade, and it snapped as the skeptile jerked his hand away.

The purple one shot another purple bolt towards me, and I jumped this time. I dodged the lance of lightning, but I hit the ceiling. Dust fell from the cracks I left behind, and I flopped on my face. The green skeptile ran up and kicked my face hard.

His steel tipped boot dented my helm, caving it in until it smacked me. My vision flashed white before I rolled back into the sewer's center. I grabbed the other side's grating and pulled myself

up before lightning flashed into the water. It hummed and crackled before the green skeptile jumped over towards me again.

I jumped up, pulling my knees close to my chest. When the skeptile landed, I stomped my heels. The concrete caved beneath me, setting the green one off balance midway through his landing. I grabbed at his throat, squeezing hard before rearing my fist back.

The wind whistled behind me. Ice shards sunk into my side, and the cold pierced deep into my chest. Growling out, I smashed my fist into the other skeptile's face, and his body went limp. Grabbing the back of his head, I pulled him into the wall before headbutting his face. It resisted my first strike, my vision going white. I slammed again. His head lurched with a sickening thud.

I roared before smashing his skull again with my own. A crack radiated throughout the cavern while the other skeptile shot lightning at me again. I pulled his partner's corpse in front of the blast. It sined and sparked before I dropped it and charged. I reached the mage, and he formed plasma knives in his hands.

He swiped at my face, but I pulled back. The blade sliced through stone, leaving glowing rock wherever he scorched. Two swipes later, and a blade sunk into shoulder. It burned like wildfire as I screamed out. The skeptile lunged its dagger at my exposed throat. I watched the dagger come at me, and fear soared into the forefront of my mind.

Before it landed, My armor's helmet opened, exposing the same jagged maw as before. It clamped onto the skeptile's hand. The sorcerer dropped his blade as bones, sinews, and muscles snapped. The sorcerer pulled a handless arm away from me.

Taking initiative, I dashed forward and hit him with two jabs. Sweat flew off the back of its head, its skull whiplashing backwards. I kept my arms tucked against my sides as the lizard roared out in pain. It pointed its hand at me again, but I jerked his palm up.

Purple lightning arced over my head, cleaving straight through a spike of my armor. I pulled him towards me with his arm. A quick haymaker cracked his cheekbone, knocking him unconscious. Like the last skeptile, I grabbed his face and headbutted it hard. Teeth fell off my helm. Another headbutt. More blood and teeth.

I smashed my face into his like a hammer, pulverizing his skull into a thick stew. I let out an animalistic roar, tossing the headless corpse aside before turning around. The green lizard guy squirmed against the wall. I walked over before lifting a heel over its head. With a wet crunch, his face caved in as I stomped down.

The concrete cracked beneath his head, one fissure forming. I heaved for breath before I wiped blood off my helm. Cracking my neck, I took a minute and let the adrenaline flow through me. Sometimes, fighting felt good, though I'd rather not headbutt everything to death all the time.

Peering down at my armor, I gave it a begrudging nod out of respect. Yeah, it was creepy as hell, but the damn thing saved my life. In that same vein, I'd rather live as a monster than die as a man. Waving off some shaking hands, I searched for the hand my armor bit off, but I couldn't find it. It probably fell into a null void or maybe my armor, but I hoped not.

I chose not to think about it as a notification sounded.

### **Level up! Five level ups!**

At least something good came out of the blood bath, and I dove into any distraction from the blood on my face. Staring at my list of perks, I found my choice for my next level thirty attribute - dexterity.

My choice was based on the fight. The stone still sizzled from the plasma blades of the mage, as did stone in the distance from his lightning bolts. Despite my armor, I wouldn't be able to tank that kind of damage. If these scavengers had landed those bolts, I'd be dead.

Thoughts of death passed over me, but I numbed to them somewhat. What was once trembling turned into a slight shake. It passed in a minute or two, and I moved on. The perk screen pulled up right after with fewer options than before. I had two perk points, however.

To my utter disbelief, that pitiful rat boss had given me a dungeon core. My armor had eaten it while devouring the rat's corpse. Thinking of the skeptile's descriptions, I connected the dots. Bosses like that rat king were why those scavenger's came here. They wanted easy dungeon cores for easy money, and I happened upon them at the wrong place and time.

They mentioned a necromancer as well. Avoiding someone like that would take priority. Before checking out my status, I put my hands on my hips. I stared down at the bodies. These guys were literal aliens, and I just killed them.

I shook my head, wrestling with that reality for a moment. The system and its changes happened so fast, and I couldn't wrap my head around it. At this point, there was no telling who and what would land here soon. I glared forward, knowing I'd need to be ready when it arrived.

Whatever *it* was.

I put five points into dexterity and opened my perk menu.

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

**[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) - Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]**

**[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.]**

**[Graceful(Dexterity of 20 or more) - Your dexterity is excellent. 1/10th of dexterity added to perception. Physical oriented skills are learned twice as quickly.]**

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

I picked the perks Graceful and Lithe before finalizing. The change coursed over me like the euphoria of an amazing stretching session. Tugging joints and tight muscles lengthened, and no part of my body felt foreign. Every fiber of every muscle obeyed my commands. I didn't feel jumpy either.

It was like I practiced every movement a thousand times. With limbs like water, I opened my attribute screen.

#### **Level 82 Attribute Menu**

**Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [20] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [10] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [12]**

I needed ten more levels before the per level perks arrived in all its glory. I prayed I'd turn into a deft titan once the perk went through. Gawking at the carnage from our fight, I needed some oomph in my build. I mean, Oppression handled mobs and groups, so I kept my build and skills aimed at one on one combat.

If it all came together like I hoped, I'd be airtight in battle. I liked that.

Magic could come later but for now, I stuck to the old tried and true strategy of punching things. It hadn't failed me so far, and I doubted it would. My armor helped ensure that. Speaking of armor, I walked over towards the skeptiles and checked their gear for something useful.

Compared to my current platemail, their tanned hide bent like aluminum foil. Taking my time, I found nothing of note. They had no money, valuables, or anything on them really. I frowned at the bodies, thinking they put everything on the line to get here. Space travel might be expensive or something.

Either way, I walked through the rest of the dungeon, killing rats for extra experience. The passive activity gave me time to think. I peered at my notifications, staring at the status updates for the scavengers. It mentioned a bounty system and how Schema protected normal people. Considering I faced no consequences for killing those aliens, having a bounty seemed pretty bad.

Avoiding one on my own head took priority, as did learning Schema's laws. I tapped my teeth together, wishing I went through the tutorial again. I needed every bit of information I could find because things were changing fast. When Schema came, so did a lot of differences in how everything worked. The possibilities were endless, and I didn't want to get washed away in the chaos.

I glanced around the sewer room for a bit longer, wondering if anything hid itself. While searching the place, the throne of the rat king looked strange. Surrounded by matchstick woodwork, its stony surface contrasted everything around it. I walked over, feeling around it. A stone panel pressed down as I did.

Darts shot towards me from above. They bounced off my armor like rain on a window. I shrugged before a set of stone tablets lowered around the dungeon floor, revealing a spiral staircase leading down.

Part of me wanted to continue exploring, but I needed to prioritize. Finding Kelsey and Michael took priority. I put a placeholder on my minimap for exploring this later when I had the time. Walking around, I found a manhole less covered by the underbrush. After climbing the stairs up, I pushed my legs against the cylinder of stone around me.

That kept me in place as I shoved hard on the manhole cover. It shoved off with some effort, and I pulled it off before hopping onto a suburban street. Keeping myself somewhat hidden, I sprinted over towards a backyard. As I did, a scream erupted nearby.

I closed my eyes, sighing as yet another distraction presented itself. Not wanting to just let someone die, I hopped a fence or two before finding a home invasion. A pack of skeletons, blue fire glowing in their eyes and swords in their hands, raided a home by kicking the door down. They pulled people out of their homes, throwing them into a circular pit.

I dragged my hands down my face, my helmet peeling away in time for me to do so. A piece of me just wanted to leave them behind to be butchered. I couldn't save everybody, and my own friends could be getting killed. Even from a casual glance, Michael and Kelsey weren't in the group.

I turned to leave before a few children howled in the pack of people. Turning back, the people's levels sat somewhere between five and ten. The skeletons were in the mid thirties. They stood no chance, but the skeletons would be child's play for me. I took a deep breath before running in. It would be a quick adventure. In and out in twenty minutes.

I got near the group, and of course, people screamed at the sight of me. Ignoring them, I smashed through a skeleton before another snapped his sword on my back. I grabbed his skull by the eye sockets, crushing his head into a different skelly warrior. Several packs of the creatures peered on from nearby houses, and they swarmed from all directions.

I killed a few before pulling them away from the pack of people. Flying in from above, a skeletal dragon flew in, breathing plumes of blue fire. I gasped at the sight of it.

**Undead Korgah | Level 281 - This undead creature is controlled elsewhere, and its flames can melt metal.**

**Run.**

I turned around and sprinted straight for the manhole I ran out of. Playing hero would get me killed, and it wasn't like I could save these people anyway. Leaping right down the cylinder of stone, the metal stairs whipped by my vision before I clipped one of them. I banged backwards, my head slapping into concrete.

Like the ball of a pinball machine, I hit every side of the sewer entrance on my way down. Flopping onto the stone ground, I stayed there for a second while feeling pain from the fall. Dexterity or not, that wasn't my smartest move.

I pushed myself up with a grunt, looking up. Above me, the glowing eyes of a skeleton peered into the manhole. One leaped down, following the same pattern I did. Not quite as robust, its dry bones splintered before it collapsed beside me.

I stomped its skull beside me before the army of undead came down the stepway. I gawked around, wondering where to run before smacking myself in the forehead. Duh, the dungeon entrance.

I sprinted towards the rat king's throne, my stomps echoing in the concrete tunnel. I ripped through a few vines and bushes before reaching the throne. I ran down the stairs, as the clatter of bone on concrete filled my ears.

I sprinted down the circular walkway, reaching a hallway. I ran down it, pillars of stone lining my sides. They carried glowing blue torches, spawned from magic. A cold, ringing silence filled the air along with a mist hugging the ground.

Unable to appreciate the sights, I found a doorway with a circular slot on its surface. Ornate markings covered its surface, the patterns flowing like the growth of branches or roots. I rubbed my temples, looking behind myself. None of the undead monsters found this place yet, but they would in time.

Racing for a solution, I looked around. Dark metal held the blue torch fires, and the mist moved when I kicked at it. Yeah, not exactly useful information. From behind, a few skeletons entered the hallway, swords brandished and eyes glowing. I wasn't scared of them, but I was of what they omened.

I rolled my hands before snapping my fingers. The circular slot was the same size as the dungeon core. As I thought about that, my armor deformed before revealing a pitch black orb from my chest. It glowed with a yellow outline. Popping out, the core landed in my hand, and I held it like a tiny eclipse in my fingers.

The dungeon cores looked as valuable as they were.

Not having time to sit around, I put the core in the doorway, and the orb floated midair. Tendrils of light leaked into the patterns, energy coursing through them as light expanded all around the glyphs.

The skeletons got close, the door taking its sweet time with this magical incantation. One of the creatures reached me, and I smashed its face into a nearby torch. The blue fire streaked across my vision as another swung a sword overhead. I grabbed its hand before another skeleton swiped at my side.

The steel sank an inch deep before another skeleton jumped over the other two. I stabbed at my face, but I tilted my head sideways, my neck bending unnaturally. Dexterity already paying off, I slammed my fist into the side of a skeleton crushing its ribs. I tore a skeleton's arm out of its socket before crushing its skull with its arm.

Jerking the sword from my side, I slammed the metal edge into the other skeleton's head before the door slid open behind me. I turned, running into a massive cavern. Skeletons fought their way inside, but I kept shoving them back. The stone doors slid closed while I kept the tide of undead at bay.

The doors slammed shut, powdering bone as they did. I turned away from the door, leaning against it. I took a deep breath, collecting myself after the chase. The incoming torrent of undead never stopped, meaning they could keep me held up until something stronger arrived, like the necromancer.

If it summoned a level two hundred, well, *anything*, then there was no telling how powerful the necromancer was. A minute passed as I got a grip on my situation. I couldn't get a break, that was for sure. Looking up for the first time, torches lit dozens of colossal pillars stretching from the top of the cavern to the bottom.

Wooden bridges stretched out from these pillars, connecting makeshift shacks at the midway points of these massive columns. Gremlins, goblins, and orcs walked on these bridges. I gave myself a few slaps, kind of exasperated at the situation. Inspecting the beasts, I took a breath of relief.

They maxed out at level twenty or so. Along the bottom of the dungeon, swarms of angular, sharp insects crawled on the ground. They carried antenna glowing like dim grapes at the tendril's ends. Colored a deep, menacing purple, these bugs reached up towards level thirty.

I bit my tongue. More bugs. Great. In the distance, a gremlin laid on its knees in front of an armored orc. The orc kicked the gremlin down into the abyss, and when it landed, the insects swarmed it. It died in less than a second. I already could paint a picture of how this place worked.

Orcs ruled over gremlin and goblins. The insects kept them fighting over the limited space the pillars offered. It wasn't the best life. Unfortunately for them, they wouldn't be existing for much longer. Being far down beneath the ground, I no longer worried about Oppression killing people on the surface.

I activated Oppression and trotted forward. Several goblins and gremlins fell off the bridge leading towards the first pillar. Confusion spread across the populace, many dying in less than a minute of exposure to my aura. Moving onward, the goblins and gremlins died in waves.

Their bodies would disintegrate into blue mana that my armor absorbed before reaching the bottom. The insects below cried out, screeches of indignation escaping their mandibles at missing out on the feast. The entire time, I inched closer to my next evolution while getting some easy experience.

The orcs would charge at me, weathering the aura well. By the time they reached me, I mashed them like dropping an egg on a countertop. They gave miniscule experience. Still, they gave tiny bits of ambient mana. The boss could be different.

He'd give me another dungeon core at least, and then I'd be able to get another perk. I paced on, eradicating the local population over time. About two hours later, I reached the fanciest shack here, with skulls, feathers, and totem poles jutting out from it. An ogre strolled out, a deep green compared with the lighter shade of his minions.

Muscles rippled as he moved with a club of iron. His teeth juttet out from his bottom jaw.

**Cracole, Exiled Ogre of the Wild(Level 34) - An ogre that was exiled by his village for his cruel hierarchical methods. He was sentenced to become a bottom dweller, living in the darkness of the caves below the village. He slowly bided his time, trying to amass an army strong enough to overtake his village.**

**After Schema moved his village, his plans fell apart. Now, he is a bitter, angry chieftain, who unleashes his wrath onto the weaker members of his village.**



It was a shame seeing the chieftain. He pushed two of his minions aside, killing them both as they screamed to their deaths. The ogre smothered anyone he deemed lower than himself. In a way, people were the same.

You couldn't judge a person's character by how they treated those above themselves. What mattered was how they treated those below them. This exiled ogre was a great example of that. As I neared the boss, it contorted in rage. It banged its chest, roaring for me to come over, but I didn't. There was no need. Oppression handled the monster for me.

The ogre vomited a stream of blood before the veins under his skin turned black. His fingernails fell out, and his eyes grew bloodshot. I frowned at my aura's influence, but then something odd happened. Claws expanded from the ogre's fingers. Skin smothered its eyes and nose. Its arms lengthened, turning into poles of elongated bone.

Its underjaw's tusks turned into long, enamel knives while drool leaked from its mouth. Red drool sizzled on the stone beneath it. I kept myself firmly on a pillar while it snarled at nearby goblins. The black beast picked one up, regurgitating acid onto the goblin's face.

The goblin's green skin peeled off, showing bone and blood from below. The goblin jerked and shivered before going limp. The dark abomination bit into the predigested corpse before turning to me. My eyes widened as I locked in on it. It roared out, ebbing forth an alien, eerie sound. Schema's message of the ogre changed.

**Shapeless Horror | Unknown lvl 84 - A force unleashed this being's inner potential at the cost of its mind. Be wary.**

I stayed back before it darted toward me. Sprinting forward, it stampeded through several goblins on the bridge before meeting me. We clashed like thunder, a booming echo surging from our impact. Stronger than I, it pushed me back. I reached the wooden bridge behind me, and the wood cracked as I pushed against its shoulders.

We shook from struggling, each of us trying to get the upper hand. I gave in, no longer pushing against it. It pushed me back while I leaned down. Coming over me, I used the monster's momentum to slam it against the twine bridge.

It lashed out with claws like steel. They scraped my helm, and I kicked the beast. It flopped sideways before I cracked my neck. I raised my hands and grumbled, "Man, I can't catch a break."

It reached me before I torqued my hips sideways and arced my fist forward. It traveled overhead, and right as the monster reached me, my fist collided with the top of its head. I nearly bounced backwards at the sheer force of the impact. The creature crashed down into the

bridge, crushing wood like dry leaves. The echoes boomed seconds later in the gargantuan cavern.

I lifted both fists into the air and crushed the monster into the bridge again. Its tail whipped towards me, piercing into my collarbone. It whirled through the air again, snapping back. I reached out and missed it, the pointed tail piercing my chest.

As the beast pulled the tail back, I grasped it. I put my foot onto its head and another foot over its back. Forced into an arch, the monster gurgled before I pressed with all my might. Its back popped, and the creature's legs went slack.

I let its tail go before lifting my hands. I battered its face. Mauling it from above, the beast's skull cracked open like a wet walnut. A few seconds later, it died. As I started wiping purple blood off me, my armor chomped on the corpse in a grotesque malformation of metal. The screeching of bending steel finally stopped when it finished eating the corpse.

With the fight handled, I turned around, wondering what caused the change in the ogre. My guess at the time? The necromancer. Peering for the summoner, I darted my head back and forth. No movement rustled on any of the pillars. The only movement showed from the writhing of insects below the bridge.

Beneath my feet, the wood creaked. I glanced down, noticing just how destroyed the bridge was at this point. I pushed off my feet to run off it, but the bridge collapsed as I did so. I fell downwards for a few seconds. My skin pulled on me, and my stomach floated as I fell. A second later, my head whipped as I landed with a monstrous boom.

Stone cracked, and bugs hissed in pain nearby. I lost my breath, my lungs and body beaten bloody. As I pushed myself off my landing spot, the insects swarmed towards me. I leaned down as they came, wanting to give in. The weakness passed, and I pushed through my exhaustion.

Oppression smothered the insects, softening them before they got to me. I smashed the bugs like trying to kill cockroaches. I stomped the guts of one. I pulled another apart. Yet another I shelled like a crab. They popped with a satisfying crunch when I hit them.

But they swarmed with fury. Covering me, they pincered at me from all angles. I kept them off my head, but they smothered me from all angles. The pile kept amassing over me, swallowing my body whole.

I kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed, feeling for their bodies. In darkness, I lashed out. In the mass, I crushed. In time, the insects crawling on me died from Oppression or my swings. I hid in their bodies, using them as a shield from the other insects. The bodies dissipated as my armor indulged on them.

My vision blurred. Peering at my status, a stacking poison debuff mounted. Willing my armor to stop, it let the pile of dying insects coat me. Like a pile of dead crickets, I stayed still while the others swarmed over me. It took over an hour of killing these damn things before they thinned enough that I could reach a pillar.

As I climbed the column, I checked out my notifications. I gained a level, so I put a point into dexterity before my perk screen appeared again. I'd gotten another core from the chieftain turned abomination.

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

**[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) - Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]**

**[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.]**

I selected Powerful this time just to climb the pillar. My body and armor lightened a tremendous amount, letting me get up this sheer face. My fingers lengthened into points, letting my stab into the rock a bit. Once I got back on the pillar, I sprinted towards the exit. Whatever unleashed that chieftain, I didn't want to fight it. At least not here on unstable bridges.

I reached another stone wall just like the one leading into this dungeon. My armor spit out the dungeon core into my hand. Holding the tiny eclipse in my palm, streams of light flowed into the gate. The glyphs on it glowed blue before the doors slid open. Dust fell from the corners and cracks of the ancient stone as they moved.

The door opened. All I could see was a wall of sickly, purple smoke as they did. This mist condensed into a single point. From it, the dried remains of a body walked out. Wearing ornate robes, the mummy paced out, his arms interlocked behind himself. His body was dry as cracks in mud, and when he moved his hands, his flesh crinkled.

Frail as it seemed, it leaked an aura of energy. The undead's eye sockets were empty, each imbued with glowed plumes of navy-shaded fire. He let his mana ebb outwards. When it crawled over me, I choked on it. This mana was thicker than the sand that the Lord of Worms released.

I couldn't even breath. He didn't even need time to set this up. I gasped,

“Please...Stop.”

He lessened his aura, letting me take a breath. He paced back and forth, considering me for a moment. Stepping up to me, it spoke with a gritty, archaic voice,

“Ah, I see neither my minions nor my experiment caught you then, hm? That is more than merely interesting. No one on your planet should be powerful enough for these beasts. Not yet, at least. You seem rather ahead of the curve, I should say.”

He raised a hand, “Pleasantries aside, I’ve a pertinent question to ask you.”

I nodded, “Yeah, anything.”

The dark blue fire turned a menacing red,

“Would you happen to know of an Alfred Worm? I am his father. Torix Worm, of Darkhill.”

## **18 Torix Worm, Of Darkhill**

I gasped, “Could you let me down?”

He tilted his head, “I shall whenever you cease that annoying aura of yours, whatever it is.”

My eyes widened, and I shut Oppression down. He waved a hand, and I fell, collapsing to my knees. Like tiny eyes, the lich squinted his glowing fireballs. He kept his gaze steady, his eyes piercing. I couldn’t hold eye contact, but his glare burrowed into the back of my head regardless.

Finally looking away, Torix pulled an ancient tome from his robes and opened it. A quick flash of umbral mana later, and he cast a spell. Two shadows pulled at my arms, holding me up. He waved a hand,

“Enough chatter of comfort. There is a marker of Alfred on you or within you. Now, you may believe that I don’t feel its presence or lack proof of its existence. I assure you, I am well armed with the required knowledge. You may choose to unveil what you have, or I will unveil it away from you.”

His eyes flashed bright, “Whether that be via interrogation or dissection, you shall decide.”

Still reeling, my head rolled before my armor spit out Alfred’s diary. One of the shadows caught the journal. It leaned onto one knee and held it out to its master. The lich put his glowing book in his robe before picking up the ragged journal,

“Ah, that was simpler than I imagined it would be. Do stay as I read this ragged tissue’s contents. Perhaps I may even thank you for it. Now, let’s see what lies therein. Hm, it does appear to be his handwriting...It...This-”

He covered his mouth. He took a step back, and his hands shook in place. He peered around as if looking for something before he fumbled with his bony fingers. His eyes dimmed after a few minutes, and he finished the book with a quick snap of the cover. His eyes fizzled out before he hugged the journal to his chest.

A tense silence, thicker than oatmeal, smothered me. I stayed silent, not really knowing what was going through the lich's mind. His eyes flared back to life as he stared off into the distance. He spoke in a small voice,

"My son...My only son. He's gone."

The pain pierced out in waves from the lich. Undead or not, the emotion was real and palpable and genuine. I didn't really know what to say, but I felt like I had to say something.

"I'm...I'm really sorry for your loss."

Tenderly and with care, he moved the journal into his robes before interlocking his hands behind himself once more. His composure reconstructed, and he returned to his previous self. The shadows waned beside me until they disappeared. I stood on wobbling feet.

Torix's tone shot out like ice, "I'll assume you're the one that killed him? And don't attempt to lie to me. It will only dig this pit you lie in further down, and it lies six feet underground already."

I gritted my teeth before nodding.

The lich trembled in place, weighing different options in his head. He turned his glance up before giving himself a slow nod. He centered onto me once more,

"Based...Based on the contents of the journal, his death was a release, given the mad ramblings at the end of this document. Tell me, did you stop this-this hivemind he called Baldag-Ruhl, of Many?"

I nodded once more. Torix sat down on an umbral blot of mana, a living shadow holding him up. He shook his hands as if getting water off them. He steepled his fingers, keeping himself tranquil despite the squall of grief writhing under his surface. Torix offered me a dark mana chair before gesturing to it,

"Tell me everything you know, from beginning to end."

Despite the commanding authority, the icy edge in his voice faded some. This was still no request; it was a command. I complied, sitting down. I spoke for a while, trying to explain who I was and why I was in the cave to begin with.

It took a while, but I told him the story of how Baldag-Ruhl tried turning me into his armor. The riftkeeper ended up giving me my current form. I kept talking about how Alfred stayed committed even after going mad, and how really, Torix's son was the one who actually stopped Baldag-Ruhl, not me.

And to my surprise, the lich listened. He kept listening, in fact. So much so that I found myself gushing. I kept discussing what had happened to me, grateful and desperate for an outlet. Anything or anyone that would give me an ear, I needed it. It just so happened this undead lich I just met happened to be a great listener.

He gave me affirmations as I unloaded all of my problems. My speaking turned to rambling, and I couldn't stop myself. I needed someone to talk with, and this ancient necromancer offered insights

and repose. I latched onto that serenity, going on about how demanding BloodHollow had been. I talked about how lonely I'd been since the system's changes.

I kept going until I discussed unformulated issues. For instance, I went on about trying to find Michael and Kelsey and how I didn't see it happening anytime soon. I even chatted about my armor and how it horrified me. Torix didn't rush me or seem perturbed with my situation. He showed no surprise and stayed calm. His only real reactions were when I mentioned the slice in dimensions, or at least that's what I guessed it was.

What mattered was that since the system started, Torix was the first person I felt comfortable with. He didn't make me feel like a freak. The guy just acted like I was normal. Considering how abnormal my situation was, I clung to that without really meaning too. That kept me going until I ran out of steam.

A quick silence passed over us, and Torix deliberated. He turned a palm to me, "It seems as though your journey's been long and hard, young one. I added to that with my minions, so do accept my apologies. You'll find them plague you or your hometown above no longer. I merely wished to search out my son. This journal is his, as it carries his mana and handwriting. I also believe you've told me what you believe is the truth."

As an aside, he chimed, "And those civilians above, they've been treated humanely, so worry not."

I believed him more than I should've. The lich crossed a leg, leaning back and steepling his fingers. He oozed dominance and poise before sighing, "What would you have me do to you? On the one hand, you freed my son from madness, a madness not even I could fix. On the other hand, you've killed him, my only flesh and blood left."

I fumbled my words, "I...I don't know. I-I never had a son. I am someone's son, but he's a jackass, so...Please don't kill me, I guess?"

The lich stared with unchanging eyes before bursting into laughter. He replied, "You've grown rather accustomed to death. To be so casual in the face of it...Even as a lich, I'm impressed. Who are you, really then?"

"What do you mean? I told you. I'm Daniel Hillside."

Torix shook his head, "No, I mean who are you *really*. You can't have already reached level eighty eight in less than a month after Schema arrived. Not for a new species without guidance."

I frowned, "I'm not lying about missing the tutorial."

Torix scoffed, "You expect me to believe that you, a human, killed a *ruhl*? A genuine ruhl."

I threw my hands up, "I thought you said you believed me?"

"I believe you haven't lied to me. Whether you believe the truth or an approximation of it is something else entirely."

"I already told you, your son is the one that really killed him. I'm just the one who followed through with his master plan. The reason I succeeded and he didn't was luck. That's it."

Torix leaned over and tapped one of my shoulder spikes, "And this, this is supposed to be The Harbinger of Cataclysm? Quite the extravagant title for someone who has yet to reach even level one hundred."

I crossed my arms, "I do well for myself. You know, considering."

"Hm...Would you mind verifying all of this for me?"

My eyes widened, "You want me to go back to BloodHollow?"

"Yes."

I shook my hands, "I really, really don't want to go back there. I just spent the first few weeks in the system stuck in that hellhole. I just got out, and I haven't been able to look for my friends at all."

Torix lowered his gaze, "But you're certain there's proof of this all occurring?"

I waved my hands, starting to ramble, "Yeah, for sure."

"Perhaps I shall go and inspect it myself to verify the validity of your claims. Should you be lying, then you understand what will become of you."

I waved my hands about, kind of nervous, "Then it looks like I'll be fine. I mean, if you think about it, this armor is your son's legacy. Killing me is like killing the last piece remaining of Alfred. Wouldn't it be more fitting for your son to be remembered for this feat of, uhm, magic? You know, to be remembered for his sacrifice?"

Torix turned a palm to me, "My son was a prodigy. While not gifted in combat, he showed an intuition for rune making that far exceeds my own. In that area, he was a well of limitless potential. He would have been an even greater sorcerer than I, if his character was better suited for it."

His tone grew wistful, "So dying like this isn't something I wish to glorify. Rather, I'd keep this hidden. For now. In that manner, it is a shame beyond measure to uncover the situation as is. I searched for him for so long. I finally found traces of his mana signature on some backwater, newly systemized world. I come hither, and guess what I uncover?"

"Uh, me?"

Torix raised his hands, "Not at all. Alfred's previous dungeon warped elsewhere as I traveled to it. It disappeared, and a century passed. I couldn't find a trace of him, not until something strange happened here. A surge of energy pulsed out, unlike any I've ever registered, and on this backwater planet. I would have thought nothing of it, just assuming it was another anomaly. But, you see, at it's very center was the slightest, familiar trace of mana."

Torix glared at me, "My son's mana, the will of his mind manifested."

Torix glanced off at the vast cavern, "I hired a blackmarket warping specialist and arrived soon after. From that dungeon, I uncovered two humans. I interrogated them. It wasn't difficult learning what I needed to know."

He found David and Stacy. I grimaced. Torix brushed off my concerns with the wave of his hand,

"I've done nothing permanent to them. They are fine. Now, continuing my story, I followed the trail those two indicated, and I found a peculiar ability used within this forest. There existed a circle of dead fauna and a pair of stomping tracks."

He met my eyes, "Here I thought a scavenger had cleared the dungeon and killed my son. I came down, hunting for the user of the ability. I plotted several traps, such as searching homes and threatening the populace. I wouldn't kill anyone for fear of the resulting bounty of course, but my ploy worked well."

I leaned forward, "Damn. That was bait, huh?"

Torix swiped his hand, "It was a simple and easy plot to enact, so I did so. You killed many of my minions, so I pursued you personally. I found the scavenger's bodies and the dungeon below the sewers. I arrived after you killed the ogre I enchanted here. I watched you kill these monsters below effortlessly."

He pinched his fingers together, leaning to me, "You, an unknown presence at such a low level. I'd never seen anything quite like it. If what you've told me is true, you showcase potential. Perhaps a mountain of it, given time. The issue therein lies in your position. Being an unknown and so young means you *will* be killed soon."

Sweat crawled down my back as Torix gestured at me, "You also have other traits that make you targetable. For instance, that...Blood Magic you have. If one wished, they could hold you down and take pounds of your flesh, using it for mana. You would become a mana battery, a fate far worse than death."

Even more cold sweat fell from me as he pointed at my feet, "And that armor of yours...I've never seen anything like it. I myself am tempted to run experiments on it, and I'm rather benevolent compared to many. My kindness is why that armor remains grafted to you instead of being peeled off as we speak."

Remembering the feelers under my armor, I shivered. Torix stood up, "Don't worry, child. I listened to you, and I do believe you. I will do my due diligence to make sure what you've said is true, of course. All that being said, I shall take my leave. I do wish you luck on your journey."

An idea popped in my head, "Wait one minute."

The lich tilted his head, "Hmm?"

"I think we can make a deal."

Torix scoffed, "You? Make a deal with me? Oh, this is going to be entertaining to the utmost."



I stood up with him, "Ok, so the thing is, you have this undead army, right?"

"Indeed."

"So you could find my friends just as you found me?"

"*Easily.*"

I turned my palm to him, "How about you help me with my friends, and I'll help you understand BloodHollow, eh?"

Torix gawked at me, stunned to silence. He let out a slight snicker before it turned into full on cackling. He shook his head, "That was certainly...*something*. What could you offer me in exchange? Undying loyalty? I have quite a few minions that exceed you in more than one domain."

I raised a hand, "But none of them were made with the ritual."

Torix withdrew a tad, taken aback, "Hah. That is certainly true. Why should I make a deal with you instead of simply forcing you to obey me? I am more than able to, I assure you."

I fumbled, "Uhm...I don't know. Maybe it would be better for your experiments if I was willing?"

Torix deadpanned, "You're insane, you know that?"

I let my hands flop against my sides, "Look man, I'm desperate here. You heard me earlier. I'm going to be by myself for a long time if this doesn't work out."

Torix gave me a nod, "I do require intricate knowledge of the comings and goings of my son's demise. You're the foremost expert of what occurred, so enlisting you may help me...I accept this little arrangement of yours."

I gaped, "You're serious?"

His eyes flashed, "Oh, dead serious."

I raised a hand, "Cause you're an undead, right?"

Torix remained still for a few seconds before pinching the bridge of his nose, "By Schema, who have I partnered with, exactly?"

I stood up, banging my fists together, "Me. I'll take the deal."

The lich interlocked his hands behind himself once more, "Well then, that's a wise decision. Now, explain how your armor works, and all you know of it."

I explained how Baldag-Ruhl's spell worked to the best of my knowledge. I described the walls of runes, miles long and utterly intricate. I described how I could show him the tunnels, and how it would make an excellent evil lair for him. He even chuckled a few times. By now, I was warming up the cold, unfeeling lich. The guy had a panache to him.

When I finished, he gestured to me, "I'll assume you've marked BloodHollow down on your minimap?"

I brought it up, "No, but I can. I've visited the cave before."

"Good. Send me a screenshot of it and the surrounding area. I will download it then go towards this dungeon ahead of you. As for your end of the deal, simply come forthwith to BloodHollow within the next few days." Torix gestured to our surroundings, "You may finish your dungeon delving here and get your dungeon core. I know it's a high value item for you at the moment, and I wouldn't want to impede your progress."

He opened his status, and a request from him appeared.

**Torix Worm, of Darkhill | level 1,236 | Friend Request | Do you accept? Y/N?**

I leaned back from my status, "What in the hell? Y-Your over level one thousand?"

Torix leaned back, "Oh yes, of course. You're just now entering the system, so you lack perspective. I am your first dose of said perspective, and allow me to add to it. My level is somewhat notable, but nothing worthy of reverence. You've simply seen very little of Schema-owned space. Know that you are strong for your level, but realize that there are beings of immeasurable power spread out across the stars. Many are much more powerful than I."

Torix stared down with pity, "You are a desirable treat for them. If they find you, they will violate you in ways you cannot even imagine."

I shivered before gulping. Knowing the necromancer hadn't turned me inside out, I smiled up at Torix, "Then I suppose I should thank you for taking me under your wing. I really appreciate it."

Torix stood taller as I said that. He spoke with a touch of pride in his voice, "I suppose it is enviable to have one willing to learn and listen. It is quite satisfying to enlighten others." Torix waved a hand, generating a portal leading about two hundred feet up to the suburbia above. Torix gave me a nod of acknowledgement,

"Good luck with your dungeon."

I nodded, "You too."

He walked through the portal, and it snapped shut, leaving me alone. Accepting the friend request, I let out a gulpful of air, pleased and peachy about how that all worked out. It seemed too good to be true that he'd help me out like that. I could learn from Torix and get a grip on what was going on with Schema.

Considering the resources at his disposal, finding Michael and Kelsey would be a breeze. And the lich was above level twelve hundred to boot. He could kill me with just a thought. The sheer, staggering potential he carried left me humbled. Having him more on my side was amazing, even if only a little.

In a way, it gave me a goal too. It would take forever before I could stand up against him, and the amount of levelling required defied convention. Thinking once more about how I'd level, I looked at the next stone doorway in this dungeon. It held the same core slot as the previous one, flowing marks making the door stand out.

Placing the ogre's core into the slot, I found the doors open up. As it did, the entire area changed. Giant pistons pumped scalding steam, with bronze metal plated over every surface. Walking onto an industrial factory's catwalk, I explored the next section of this layered dungeon.

Pipelines littered every surface, the steampunk aesthetic drawing my eye. Giant vats of molten metal poured out into molds, making parts for machines. Those machines rested on conveyors, leading towards tunnels of metal. I furrowed my brow as my eyes caught up with the change in scenery. Even from a cursory glance, the progression made no sense whatsoever.

Based on everything I knew, it seemed like Schema organized the cracks of the dimensions however it had to. That resulted in chaotic mishmashes like this. While confusing at times, I couldn't help but get swept away a bit in the excitement. This kind of variety meant each dungeon carried limitless potential, and that put a weight off my chest. I wasn't going to be sitting in underground caverns each and every time.

Sometimes, I'd get surprises like this. Letting myself get swept up in the moment, I let myself run wild a bit. My feet clunked with each step as I bolted down the catwalk. I passed hissing steam and pumping machines, and I dove deeper into this labyrinth of bronze. Further down, a machine with two sword arms dropped down from a pipeline above. It had three wheels for legs, and no face. A few carvings on it mirrored a greek mural.

I inspected it.

**Trolm Guard Bot | Level 31 - A guard bot made for defending trolm factories. Basic and easily dispatched, this sturdy design is a result of the trolms themselves. A race of evolved trolls, trolms are a hardy, powerful race with intricate technical knowledge. With powerful regeneration, tremendous physical stature, and mastery of basic machinery, they are to be feared.**

**But their guards are not.**

Reading a history of the bot reminded me of diving into the lore of some games I played. I couldn't help but smile as the ball of bronze rolled my way. For once, I chose to go into a dungeon. Instead of some harrowing trial, this turned into a fun adventure. Knowing it stood no chance, I charged towards the bot, meeting it head on.

Swiping my arms diagonally, I struck the swords at an angle, breaking them. I raised my knee, and the bot met it. It crushed against me. Tumbling back, it slowed down while I rushed forward. I turned my torso sideways then kicked the robot with a sling of momentum. The robot flew off the catwalk, falling into a machine's grinding gears below. It crumpled like a tin can.

Another bot fell from above, and it slashed its swords. I darted away, evading the slashes. It stuck with a routine pattern, each attack at a set interval. I waited, getting the timing before grabbing an arm midswing. The other blade came down, but I tilted my shoulder up. The edge skidded down my shoulder and into the metal railing.

I pulled its other arm, and it pulled apart, leaving it armless. I lifted a hand up before squashing it like an amber, metal tomato. More guards arrived, and I grinned.

I decimated them. I crushed guard after guard for over an hour. Less like a dungeon and more like a playground, I relished in my improved strength, appreciating it. For the first time since systemization, the future excited me. After a while of destroying bots, I ran into the boss of this factory.

Standing at the center of a circular platform, a spider robot waited for me. It walked on four limbs and held weapons in its other hands. A giant eyeball centered on me, metal folds interlacing as it squinted. The blue iris and pupil turned red, and it raised its armed hands.

Knowing it didn't outlevel me, I stampeded towards it like an angry elephant. I dodged one of its sword limbs before grabbing a leg. I jerked with explosive strength, ripping the leg ripped off. My legs needed a moment to recover, so I used its torn leg to block a rain of swords, hammers, and saws. Dented and falling apart, I tossed the ripped limb at the eye of the creature.

It raised its four weaponized arms to block. As it did, I dashed forwards. The lobbed metal bounced off its weapons, and the beast peered at me as I swung at it. Throwing my fist like a baseball, I shattered the glassy exterior protecting its eye. Cracks radiated up the brittle glass, and its vision deteriorated.

It swung at random afterwards, and I kept my distance, waiting for a time to strike. A few minutes passed and the joints began glowing from building heat. It paused mid attack, steam billowing from its robotic innards. Crawling on top of it, I gripped its arm joints to get on top of it.

I gripped my hands against its bronze body and pulled apart. The metal screamed and crumpled as I strained with effort. Taking a few breaths, I caught my breath as it cooled itself off. Rearing its limbs back, the spider bot swung them down at me. I fell into the opening I just sheared. Tearing wires and pipes apart, I jerked and slammed my fists in every direction.

Oil splurged everywhere as I gouged out its insides. When I forced myself out of the robot's eye, it stopped moving. In a less disturbing manner than eating flesh, my armor gobbled up the robot. The armor over my skin outdid bronze, apparently, so I just waited until the bot's body was devoured. While I waited, I checked out my status screen. There was another perk from where my armor ate another core.

**[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) - Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]**

**[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.]**

I was almost out of perks at this point. I figured I'd be listening to quite a few lessons from Torix, so I selected Smart. It seemed like a, well, smart decision. Terrible jokes aside, I waited for a sudden shift. I didn't really notice anything, but I also wasn't straining my memory yet either.

Wanting to feel Smart's effects, I tried recollecting some childhood events, and they remained as foggy as ever. I hoped the perk helped forming memories more than past ones as I closed my status. Reaching another doorway at the end of the bot's room, I found another slot for a dungeon core.

I couldn't read the glyphs above, but it didn't matter. I already knew the gist of what it was saying. Having a handle on the situation, I put another core into the doorway. When it opened, it acted the same as BloodHollow's gateway. Warping reality, these doors opened to a ladder and manhole. Bewildered by the view, I put my head through the doorway, and gravity shifted.

On the one hand, my body pulled down. On the other hand, my head weighed down in a different direction. Taking the next step, I grabbed the ladder so I wouldn't fall. Gravity finished changing as I climbed through the doorway. I crawled my way out the dungeon, the warp snapping shut behind me. I blinked a few times while holding the ladder in the sewer tunnel.

Man, dungeons weirded me out.

I shook off the surreal feeling before getting out of the sewers. Pulling my head out into some fresh air, the streets remained dead silent. I hopped out before sprinting towards a backyard. Hiding behind fences, I opened my minimap. I was right where I thought I was. Just like Torix, I did some due diligence myself.

I ran towards the place where the skeletons piled people together. I found no bodies or blood lingering around. Still not convinced, I turned to the nearby houses. People closed their doors, but the broken windows still whistled as wind leaked into each house. Freshly broken glass sheened on the porches and yards while I approached.

Peering in, a few people gawked at me in horror with make-shift spears or kitchen knives in hand.

One tried poking me, but I slapped the blade aside. Knowing Torix could've let only one family go, I investigated three other homes, finding familiar faces in each of them. Torix made good on his word, so I would do the same. Knowing where to go next, I sprinted back towards BloodHollow yet again, dreading my quick return to the dim, dank caves.

Keeping my pace rapid, I darted over fallen logs and charged through vined bushes. The faster I handled Torix's demands, the faster I'd find Michael and Kelsey. My minimap's direct route also made my return simple. Those thoughts pressing me onward, I sprinted like a man running from a tsunami. It was mostly for fun.

I could, so I figured, why not?

Twenty minutes later, a sunset signalled the day's end. I reached the caves that trapped me for two weeks. The opening changed some, showing ornate pillars and the otherside of the Sentinel's

doorway. A walkway led down to those doors, torches lit along set intervals leading to BloodHollow. Trotting down those steps, I got to the entrance.

The doorway opened, and I winced as recognizable darkness showed itself once more. Bats flashed their fangs at me, and the Sentinel peered down,

"Know that should you enter this place, you will not be permitted to leave until...Wait, you're back? Already?"

I grimaced at my surroundings, "Yeah. Unfortunately for me."

The Sentinel slammed his spear down, the doorway closing behind me, "It's unfortunate for us both. You'll be permitted to leave whenever you wish, preferably sooner rather than later."

Letting his jabs slide, I passed by him towards the marker on my map. I didn't have time for banter. Torix had a little icon for his name and everything now. Taking an hour of running and killing bats, I found signs of the lich's presence everywhere.

Undead raided the cavern from head to toe. Creatures of darkness walked while swollen zombies shambled in all directions. These zombies carried enormous, bulbous sacks of bioluminescent material. They lit the surroundings while undead knights ran their bony hands along the walls.

Nearing Torix himself, shadow monsters created patches of darkness in the zombie's blue glow. Undead Korgah's sat as guardians, decimating the local bat populace, one of the dragon-sized creatures holding a crimson bear in its maw. It chewed the bear to bits in two bites, tossing the entrails and organs into a pile of other corpses.

My armor trembled as I passed the bodies. A few of the undead knights took a dive in a nearby cyan pool, other knights watching the descent. These underlings hunted in every direction, and Torix kept them contained with ease. A bit disgusted, I approached the necromancer in the distance. Torix himself laid at the center of all this carnage. He ran his hands against the walls, looking for the runes I mentioned.

Walking up beside Torix, the lich murmured, "Hm, you work quickly. Excellent. Now, perhaps you may show me where these runes are?"

I nodded and ran towards one of the tunnel entrances. Torix followed behind me, riding on a ball of black he summoned in a second. We approached a tunnel where boulders piled high, interlacing with the wall. No transition exposed where these tunnels began and ended, masking them well. When we reached an entrance, Torix peered at it,

"So this is how that rift holder lived for so long. I must say, masking himself so utterly and by design alone...Impressive."

I jumped onto a boulder, "You haven't seen anything yet."

We entered the tunnel and Torix's jaw dropped. The necromancer marveled at each intricate and meticulous rune, peering at their depths. Torix stammered, "I...I don't understand *any* of this. Is this an eldritch language, perhaps? It doesn't match any linguistic pattern I've learned henceforth."

Finding a marking that radiated curiosity, Torix murmured, "My son was able to read all of this?"

I nodded, "He could, but we'll need to go deeper into the cave to see it all. This is a drop in the ocean."

Torix scoffed, "There's more than what's present here?"

I smiled, "Oh, a lot more."

We passed by several miles of the tunnel, Torix's surprise mounting with each passing moment. It made the entire ritual take a step up in my mind. I knew it was impressive, yeah, but having this knowledgeable and ancient necromancer marvel with me...Well, it put the incantation into perspective.

After a half an hour of sprinting, we eventually reached the colosseum's center. The bat's already cleared out the bugs, revealing the majesty of the spell Baldag-Ruhl cast. I gestured at it,

"This is the culmination of your son's work. He and Baldag-Ruhl created this...Whatever it is."

Torix rubbed his hand against the wall, in awe at the complexity. He spoke with reverence, "To think my son had such an understanding of these markings. Perhaps you were right about your armor being his legacy. This...This is something I can take pride in. It's something he would've relished doing."

Torix's eyes dimmed, "Perhaps...perhaps his life wasn't as full of suffering as the journal indicated. I can only pray that is the case."

I sat there waiting for him to finish his remembrances. After many minutes, he walked at his full height, no hunching whatsoever,

"I can gather the formatting of the spell, though I lack the insight to gather its context. Some of this is my son's handwriting. You can tell by the curves, as they hold more flow to them than Baldag-Ruhl's carvings...I wonder...Ah, ingenious. Bypassing the limitation of internal mana by drawing from dimensional space...But how could you control the energy, let alone form it?"

Torix peered around, "They-they used a blueprint of another's soul for grounding the innate chaos of the working mana...I've no idea how. Color me surprised...And this, I can't believe they used a weighting algorithm for displacing the interdimensional pressure, then correlated the flux in time with a quantum stabilizing function."

I stayed quiet, not wanting to expose my immense ignorance. When Torix finished studying the runes, he put his hands on his hips, "This would take a thousand years to carve if you had a thousand people doing it, all without a moment's rest. The hivemind handled the bulk of this project if I assume correctly?"

I pointed at a few of the bugs still lying around, "Yup. Those are his little minions."

Torix pressed on his temples with his fingertips, "This hivemind was a prodigy all his own. It really was a ruhl." Torix turned towards me, "And your armor is the product of all this. I would've assumed it would do more than that."

I shrugged, "It can evolve. I think that's the dealbreaker."

The lich paced back and forth, "Ah yes, that is worthy of note. Precisely how much it evolves is the true question then, isn't it? Tell me, how much mana is left before its next evolution?"

I checked, finding 30,000 from all the rats, bats, and machines I killed. I tapped my chestplate, "Pretty much two million. I have thirty thousand stacked up, but most of that came from the purple insect swarm."

Torix continued, "Then, in order to understand your armor's properties and the ritual's full implications, our first objective is evolving this armor. That shall coincide with leveling you over a hundred. At that point, scavengers and bounty hunters will be less of a concern. Otherwise, I'll need to guard you every second of every day."

He waved a hand, "That will simply not do. During that time, I'll inspect this ritual."

I put my hands on my hips, "Any Ideas on how to gain those levels? Finding a difficult dungeon here is actually harder than the dungeons themselves."

Torix raised a hand, "Not a usual problem, but one that is rectifiable no less. On my own planet, you'd find many dungeons, some harboring creatures over level one thousand."

I raised an eyebrow, "So, what planet are you from?"

"Xanathar. It's a peculiar world, tidally locked so habitable land is sparse. The weather is quite harsh as well. Perhaps you shall see it one day. Now-"

He pulled out his grimoire and used a magical incantation. The lines across the pages glowed a dimming black, one that siphoned light from our surroundings. After a few minutes of channeling, a portal appeared, wide and black and null. More like a void than an opening, Torix pointed at it,

"From this portal, my personal monsters will come. You can gain experience from killing them."

I clasped my fists, "Alright. I'm always looking for a good fight."

Torix gave me the look of a stern librarian, "That can be arranged quite easily. For instance, these creatures will be above your level, as that most efficiently grants you experience. You're fine with the risk that entails?"

A part of me held onto some fear. I lifted my hands, and a part of me just let that fear go. My adrenaline spiked. The same part of me that liked boxing told me I enjoyed fighting like this too. In a way, I relished it. I peered between Torix and the portal,



"Yeah, I am."

Torix clapped his hands once, "Quite the show of bravery and decisiveness. That is an excellent quality in any aspiring pupil. Now, it is time to test if it was truly bravery, or perhaps simply foolishness."

From the portal, a howl like screaming children and the sloshing of torn organs echoed. My gaze hardened as a set of claws grasped at the portal. I leaned over while raising my hands. Torix raised a finger, lecturing at me,

"Now, Daniel, there is something to be said for joy in combat. That being said, I am of the opinion that the concept of a good fight doesn't exist. There exists only slaughter. Hear me child, you can choose to slaughter or become the slaughtered."

He eyed me, "In that manner, you embrace brutality or become the product of it. Tell me, will you become a monster, or will you be eaten by them?"

An eye the size of a dish plate opened inside the void. Streams of red came together into a blot of blood at its center. An amber iris opened from the red sphere, and a red pupil laid within it. The feral eye locked with mine. I riled myself up, tearing down the fear in me. Getting ahead now meant easy times later.

I banged my fists together like blocks of iron, speaking from a primordial place,

"I will be no monster, for I feast on them."