

35 Aftershocks

Heading out towards the forest's edge, Althea raised a hand to me, "I wanted to thank you for capturing me that day we met."

I scratched the back of my head, remembering the bloody battle, "You sure you want to thank me? I wasn't the one that captured you either. That was Torix."

Althea faded between trees, "I talked with Torix, and you're one of the biggest reasons I'm still here. Your armor gave me this opportunity, and Torix told me you took a risk so I could learn about my powers. Why didn't you tell me that before?"

I leaned against a tree trunk, "If I had to guess, it's because I didn't want undeserved thanks. I chose to do that because I thought it wasn't risky, so it kind of feels disingenuous to accept good will when I didn't give it in turn."

Althea's brow furrowed, "You can't lie that you helped me with our fights."

I winced, "I mean, all I did was beat the hell out of you."

Althea glared, "That's exactly what I needed...At the time."

"Look, I'll take your thanks. I just don't think I deserve it."

Althea peered at a passing bird, "You don't know what my life was like before all this. Heh, it wasn't the best. There's a lot of pain and discomfort in this new life I've got, but—"

The bird landed on her finger, and I gawked at it. Althea gave it a pet with a finger, "This is a lot better than concrete walls, flavorless mash, and being alone all the time...So thank you. I mean it."

I shrugged, "I'll be honest. I didn't do it for you. I wanted Torix to find my friends faster."

Althea smiled, "Does it really matter why you did it?"

A peered at the bird perched on Althea's finger. It let out a cute little tweet. I said, "Eh, I guess not...You ready for another fight?"

She threw her hand up, the bird flying over towards a nearby branch, "Always."

I pointed at her, "Wait a minute. I said that first."

Her arm reformed into a biological mass, and Althea cringed during the process. I let her finish before she took aim. She narrowed her eyes, "Let's do this."

I dashed towards her before she directed her gun and fired. A bone harpoon drilled towards me. I shot out an arm and diverted the spear. Instead of knocking it away with force alone, I shifted my

momentum as the spear made contact. I reangled the back of my hand, and I molded my armor at the same time.

Despite my adjustments, the spear rocked against my hand, skidding off with sparks. It slid into the ground, disappearing beneath a carpet of leaves. A few more spears shot my way, but I took my time deflecting them. It took all my effort each time she fired, but her ammo limited itself to her health regeneration. With time on my side, I formed my armor into landing pads so her spears skidded off me better than before.

Several spears into the process, and the mental strain for deflecting waned. Several minutes later, and it took a few seconds of thought at most. Althea sighed, "Gah, if I learn how to fire my spears, then you just learn how to deal with them."

I kept my gaze on her, "It's a learning process. What else have you got for me?"

She leaped onto a nearby tree, lodging claws into the bark. Taking a second, she fired her cannon before leaping to another thick trunk. I deflected them, but she kited me well, keeping me in her sights as I approached. She grew a fleshy sack of green over her arm grasping one. She tossed it at me. I tried catching it to throw back, but the green ball detonated at my touch.

I breathed in a bit of air. The gas turned into bile that burned my lungs and throat. It kept sizzling like an acid. The thick mucus squirmed around in my body, growing needles out into my lungs. My chest impaled in all directions, my breathing strained. Blood flooded into my mouth from my throat. It dripped down my chin as I murmured,

"Damn, doesn't this seem like a bit of overkill?"

Althea's eyes widened, "I...I'm so sorry. I didn't think it would come alive like that."

Strands of my armor reached out, shearing the green needles. The metal in my body absorbed the invading mass of green, and the wires even cleaned up my blood. Standing straight again, I shouted, "Maybe keep the killing moves to a minimum, huh?"

Althea flushed, and she frowned, "Sorry. It won't happen again."

We readied again on the ground after a reset. This time, I shot forward, reaching beside her. A pair of wings ripped out of Althea's back. The dark membranes mirrored BloodHollow's bats, and she darted out of my grasp. As she flapped her wings, her clothes tore, her bones creaked, and her back ruptured. She grimaced, a fresh coat of blood covering each wing.

In the air, those new appendages extended out several times longer than her body. Althea landed on a tree branch, smirking down at me, "Heh...Pretty cool, right?"

I smiled back, "I suppose."

Augmentation mana flooded my legs, and I stomped my heels into the dirt. A slight shockwave rippled through the clay surface. I shot up from a patch of dented dirt, crags of soil uplifted around

me. Transforming yet again, Althea expanded long, black claws from her feet. They mimicked the crimson bears in BloodHollow.

Althea gripped into my raised arms with those talons. Her eyes watered out as the claws shoved her toes aside. Despite her pain, those claws pierced through my metal skin, something the bears could never do. In response, I wielded my armor, shifting spines up and out of my shoulders. Denser than the claws, my spikes stabbed through Althea's talons. She howled out before reaching up her hand.

Her face wrinkled as she cut her talons off. I fell down, the dark claws puncturing several inches into my shoulders and arms. Thumping onto the ground, the dirt caved in under me, making the fall less backbreaking. Pulling myself up, I took a deep breath, my lungs emptied. My armor grasped around the talons in me, soaking them into the steel.

I shivered at it, and Althea let out a few unsteady breaths. I put my hands on my hips, "You sure you want to continue? We don't have to."

Althea's feet returned to normal, several holes puncturing her slick, black boots. She let out a breath, "Woah...It's ok, and I'm fine. It's just really, really painful."

I raised a brow, "Why do it then?"

She slapped her cheeks a few times, "Because I'll have to fight like this in the future. It's best to just get used to it now. Otherwise, I'll be wasting a lot of my abilities." She grimaced, "Even if it hurts, like, so bad."

A bit of respect spawned in my chest, "Man, that's a good mindset. I'll see if I can't help you out then...Ready for another round?"

She stayed balanced on the thin tree branch with ease, "Sure."

I picked up a nearby rock, flipping it over my head. I caught it before hurling it at Althea's branch. It snapped into fragments, but Althea leaped from tree to tree. She fired at me while I kept getting rid of her roosts with rocks. After a while, Althea timed her firing in tandem with my tosses. That let a few of her spears land, each of them impaling right through me.

Knowing this wouldn't work in my favor, I used my trump card. Oppression expanded from me, smothering all life. It killed grass, nearby birds, and even the trees. With better control of the aura, I whipped it at Althea's current roost. The branch rotted and collapsed under her heft. Althea tumbled in the air before reorienting herself. Before she dove away, I heaved another rock into one of her wings.

It snapped, blood leaking from the fragile limb. Althea thudded into the dirt, and I charged at her. I deactivated Oppression, and I jumped at her with my fists raised. She rolled sideways, my hands crunching into dirt and roots. Althea leaped backwards and murmured,

"Geez. That would've hurt."

I scoffed, "I can't hold back too much."

She narrowed her eyes, her cannon molding back into her body. Flesh and sinews popped before she expanded long, white claws from her fingertips. She brandished them out with her arms wide. I stepped forward, confident in my close combat. Althea whipped her claws at me. I pulled a leg up, kneeling her hand into the air. The impact threw her off balance while I pulled leg down. As my foot hit the ground, I bounced myself up into the air.

As Althea got her footing, I lifted my legs against my chest. Right in front of her, she raised her arms, and my heels pressed right against her. Being heavier than her, I pressed her straight into the ground. My feet landed onto her chest, holding her down. I gave her a grin from above,

"Got yah."

She slid right into the ground, and I gawked at her descent. I turned in different directions while she rumbled in the ground below. A spine of bone launched from behind, gouging into my back. Another spine landed into my stomach. From all angles, she fired at me with bone picks, the damage mounting. Before she gained too much ground, I sprinted towards a tree.

I ran up its side before leaping into the air. With a momentous slam, I crushed my heels into the ground, sending out a shockwave. The sound of claws tearing the soil ceased before I formed my hands into dull, thickened plates. With those panels, I dug into the ground. Finding something, I jerked the thing out from a tunnel below.

I held a silver eel, thousands of tiny claws coursing across its elongated body. My eyes widened at the abomination, and it whipped itself at me. Unbelievably strong, the eel sliced my helmet. It tore through and sliced a gash across my forehead. It snapped its body at me again, but I ducked down. I grabbed it with both hands, and the thing writhed in my grasp.

I turned it in my hands like a whip before slamming the monster into the ground. After several slams later, the bottom half of her body detached like a lizard's tail. Althea reformed, her clothes tattered. Her eyes shifted color, her chest heaving for breath. When she exhaled, she let out an inhuman wail. I frowned. She lost control again.

Staring down, I peered in horror as her leftover piece of tail opened a toothy maw. The eel fragment stabbed into my armor, and it shoved itself under my skin. I reached out at it in terror, trying to pull it out. Like a blot of animated pain, it crawled through my arm. Before it reached my chest, my armor snapped out with wires of metal. They pierced the fragment of Althea, mincing and eating it in seconds.

I let out a breath, my hands shaking as I gawked at the sight. I turned back up, raising my hands, "Althea. You need to calm down."

She glowered at me. Her stomach bulged out as she darted forward. The lump traveled up into her throat then out of her mouth. She vomited the green acid straight onto me. This time, I molded my

armor into a smooth, solid shell. The acid poured over the plate before I shoved my arms out. Acid sprayed in all directions. Some smothered Althea, leaving her howling out in agony.

Her deformed voice radiated across the landscape.

While watching, mana swelled inside my chest. The fiery aura and arcs of lightning flashed out of my skin as Althea generated a spear of bone and chunked it at me. I clapped my arms together. I grasped the lance, gripping with all my strength. My feet skidded back as I caught the spear in my hands. The dust settled as I stared at the harpoon, riveted so that it looked like a narwhal's tusk.

Althea threw another spear, and I diverted it. Spinning in a circle, I lobbed the spear in my other hand at her. The spear dug straight into Althea's arm, ripping through her flesh like tissue paper. The harpoon pinned Althea's engorged arm against a tree, and I darted towards her. She lashed out with a hand, but I ducked under the wild swing.

I kicked up, stomping my foot onto her chest. My foot fell through her sternum, and I gawked in horror, thinking I killed her despite the soft impact. The inside of her ribcage showed itself, and her ribs turned into two sets of teeth. They clamped down onto my foot. They stabbed into my armor before her body tried pouring into mine. I gritted my teeth before growing my armor from my foot like a set of spikes.

They stabbed through her chest and ribs, but her ribcage of teeth kept clamping down before slicing through my foot. I fell onto my left side before she writhed on top of me. From inside her sternum, intestines poured out. They crawled into my helmet, digging under my eyelids and into my nose. In that moment, no fear or terror or pain engulfed me.

I only hungered.

My armor pierced her at all angles. Wires dug into her body and sapped her strength. Oppression's aura smothered her, and she pulled back. My armor's helmet opened a toothy maw, latching onto her. It bit and tore. Chunks fell from her as Althea's monstrous form lunged back. Like a bug being thrown in fire, her tentacles withered and wilted as she scrambled away from me. I walked over and reared my foot back, ready to kick her head to mush.

I smiled as the thought came over me.

Before I kicked, awareness rushed over me. Althea's monstrous form trembled in my vision. She shook in pain, no longer a threat. I snapped myself out of whatever took a hold of me, and I let my foot down. I deactivated Oppression before letting out a sigh. Althea returned to normal, and she looked up at me. Tears littered her eyes, and blood oozed from her mouth. She covered her face, and she whimpered,

"I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do...Whatever that was."

I closed my eyes, remembering the moments in the forest where Althea stayed with me. She helped me then, so I forgave her now.

"It's nothing."

She blinked out tears, "I just...I wanted to win. And I was close before...And then I lost it and...Gah, I'm a freak."

My armor trembled over me, hungry for more of her blood. I smiled, "Hah. You and I both."

She peered up at me, stunned at my apathy. She blinked for a second, "You're...You're not mad at me?"

I stared at my hands, having an out of body moment. I leaned back from them, "Huh...No I'm not. I'm fine. I feel good, actually...Great even."

She peered up, "So...We're still friends?"

I let my hands flop on my sides, "Absolutely. Relax."

She looked away, unable to meet my gaze. She murmured, "But that was...That wasn't ok."

I frowned, "I get to decide if I'm angry over it, and I'm not. If you're worried about this kind of thing happening again though, we should fight with Torix as a referee. He can pull you back from the brink, so it won't ever reach that point again."

I grabbed one of my hands with the other one, "But yeah, I'm fine. That didn't affect me that much, surprisingly."

She shook for a second, remembering something. Althea gazed up, "What was that skill you used?"

"You mean Oppression?"

She flinched, "It was like my entire body was thrown into a vat of molten acid. I couldn't even think it was so bad. It actually snapped me out of my, uhm, transformation."

I crossed my arms, "That could be useful in the future." I turned to the abandoned quarry, "You want to head back? Torix told me not to use Oppression, and you need some more clothes."

Althea leaned back against the tree, her inviting figure more displayed than she'd like. With outstanding grace, she reached around the tree, grabbed it, and pulled herself behind it. Landing upright, she stood behind the trunk. She murmured, "Can you, uhm, go first...Please?"

I turned, "I'll get Torix to get you some new clothes, preferably some that won't tear so easily. The robes aren't cutting it anymore."

After jogging towards the quarry, I found Torix and Kessiah doing their thing. Kessiah covered herself in the white orb of energy, and Torix kept his fire eyes centered on his ritual, running some calculations. I reached up a hand to the lich, "Yo, Torix, I used my aura earlier. I remember you mentioning that it could give my location away, so I figured I'd let you know about it."

Without turning from his work, Torix's voice sounded into my ears as if he were right beside me, "Send me the location, and I'll have one of my undead sorcerers replace the life there with origin magic."

I looked at my minimap, putting it in front of my vision with a thought. I enlarged it, and I placed a fingertip over our sparring location. The coordinates popped up where we fought. Wondering how to copy paste the info, a message with that data automatically sent to Torix. I guffawed, "Man...This messaging system is so intuitive."

Torix's voice resonated, "You should try using an obelisk. It allows for full customization of your system layout. My own is highly personalized."

My eyes widened, "What's an obelisk?"

Torix sounded out, "It's a tool used to interact with Schema's interface. Kessiah's over there playing games or wasting time on hers."

I peered at the white, hovering orb. I raised a brow, "It's kind of like a smartphone."

Torix murmured, "What is a smartphone?"

I blinked, "Think of...Like, it's a device that lets you talk to other people, but it also lets you do other stuff."

Torix scoffed, "Well that much is obvious. Why would you have a device that only handles a single task? It would be a waste of valuable space."

I shrugged, "It was like that in our society because of limited technology."

Torix's tone lightened, "Oh...It must be similar to how a burgeoning species starts their own fires physically instead of via magic?"

"Uh...Yeah. Sure."

"Was there anything else you needed? I really must put my full attention into this."

"Althea needs new clothes. Her transformations are tearing them apart."

A portal spawned over me, and robes fell out. Torix mumbled, "She simply can't contain herself, can she? That's the fiftieth pair this week."

My eyes widened. Althea practiced quite a bit, but I still beat her despite the level difference. My armor and Oppression gave me that edge. If she filled in some of her weaknesses, she'd take me out with ease. Those thoughts drifted in my mind as I took the robes back to Althea. I got back to the tree she hid behind. I called out, "Hey, I'm tossing the robes to your left."

I tossed them, and her hand wove through the air, snatching all the garments. I walked away, letting her change. In her new clothes, she walked up while putting her hair behind her ear,

"I...I can't believe you pushed me so hard in that fight. Heh, you actually won."

We walked back to the quarry, and I avoided the underbrush while saying, "I think my aura's the main reason. It's brutally effective against you...Have you invested into constitution yet?"

She peered off, "No, not yet. I put a point into the attribute for the damage resistance, but I found it makes me all thick and clunky."

I pushed a branch aside, "Being thick isn't always a problem." I gave her a mockingly promiscuous look and raised my eyebrows a couple times. She laughed before I smiled in a different direction, "Either way, the mass shouldn't be a problem for you. You're strong enough to move yourself even with some extra weight."

She hopped and skipped over each branch, her movements light like magic, "I guess I could, but the damage resistance makes my transformations hurt more. It's like instead of morphing water, I'm morphing ice. It makes the whole process, like, way harder to pull off."

She did a round off, cartwheeling over a bush before bouncing up over a branch with a backflip. I frowned at her, "Now you're just showing off."

She landed on her feet, smiling at me, "Maybe a little."

We reached the quarry, taking a break to eat. Althea actually ate a few cans of human food, using a heated gemstone and pan from Torix. I drenched my face in Torix's desert rations, the food sinking in through my skin in seconds. I trained my mana while Althea sat nearby. She moved the pan, warming up some beef stew while hugging her knees to her chest. She talked to me,

"You know...I tried using my powers this time. It's like...If I didn't fight using my strengths, I'd lose every time." Her tone dampened, "Even though I still lost, and I become a *thing* when I fight."

I stared down at a tiny orange plume coming from my finger, "It's a part of who you are, like my armor. You should accept it."

From under the cover of her knees, she peered at me, "Maybe I could do that a little...It's tough though."

I raised an arm, flexing it, "Not as tough as me. Did you see me catch that spear?"

Her eyes brightened, "Yeah. That was cool...Your aura's the hardest part to deal with though...I-I think I could beat you if you didn't have it."

I made two tiny plumes of augmentation mana from my fingers, "You just need more constitution to fight against me. If you had maxed out damage resistance, I'd lose. Hell, I can't believe you wormed

all my tricks out of me like that with a suboptimal build. My mythical skill was also supposed to dominate once we got close."

She rocked back and forth, "My uh...Powers makes me really good at overwhelming my opponent once they get close. If we were standing, I think you'd have gotten me. Once I get someone on the ground, I can just block their breathing in a, er, a bunch of different ways, actually."

My skin crawled, "What skill lets you do that?"

She put her chin onto her knees, "So, it's not really a skill. It's an ability like that aura of yours. IT's called Flesh of Eldritch. It lets me use my mana to manipulate my body. The mana also impacts my mind, and it makes me less stable...You've seen the side effects of that plenty of times. I *hate* it."

I nodded, and a natural silence passed over us. It kind of surprised me how little strain that quiet carried, most long lapses in talking both awkward and uncomfortable for me. With Althea though, it was fine. I relaxed, pouring mana into my hands. Seconds later, I hopped up onto my feet,

"What's got you so chatty all of the sudden?"

She blew on her stew, cooling it down, "I don't know...I just feel like I have a place here now...It's nice."

I tried envisioning an opponent and fighting them. I punched as I talked, "I get that. I suppose the way you got into our group was rocky at best. To be fair, my introduction wasn't the smoothest either."

Althea shrugged her shoulders, "Yeah...For me, I felt like I was going to die for the longest time. Torix is scary, maybe even scarier than the doctors I worked with. Once I got to know him though, he's a big old softie."

Torix's voice radiated around us both, "I heard that. Don't force me to prove your accusations false, young lady."

She put her head behind her knees again, "Sorry Torix."

The lich's tone lightened, "Then I'll let this matter slide. Let me know if you need other rations."

She smiled up, "Will do Torix."

It beamed at the interaction, knowing Torix was indeed a big softie. At least to Althea and me. Another silence passed over us. It coursed like a cool breeze. Breaking the quiet, Althea lifted a hand, morphing it. The flesh snapped and cracked while she winced, "But you know, if I think about it, those doctors did *this* to me. I don't think anything Torix has done reached this level of...Of awfulness, I suppose. Maybe Moloth."

I frowned, "Is that what lets you pierce my armor or cut through stone?"

She shook her head, "No. That's my other passive skill. It's called Etorhma's Tears. I don't understand that one. Like...At all. It's really ambiguous and eerie." She raised her hands, waving her fingers, "You know, one of those *spooky* descriptions."

I sighed, letting my hands down, "That's just like my armor. It's been acting up since I got caught in the dimensional slice. It's become more active since. I can't tell if it's a good or a bad thing yet."

Her eyes widened, "Wait...Is that armor why you're not mad at me?"

I nodded. Althea mouthed, "Oh...Then it's got to be a good thing."

I scoffed, "That's all it takes for evil eldritch carapaces to get a good wrap these days?"

She grinned, "In my book, yeah. Why not?"

I smiled at the thought of Althea raising a bunch of eldritch to sooth other people. I could imagine her doing something like that. We sat there for a second before Althea stared at her hands, "Do you ever feel like you're not who you say you are sometimes?"

I peered up, "Huh. If I give it some thought, I'd say no one is who they say they are. You are who you are, and your thoughts about it are just interpretations." I raised my brow, "Damn...I'm becoming like Torix. This is bad."

She rolled her eyes with a mischievous smile, "Oh, he'd be proud."

I raised a hand, whisper-shouting at her, "Don't talk too loud, he'll get mad again."

We laughed before Althea peered at the ground. She frowned, "I know we're different than what we think about ourselves. What I meant is do you feel like we shouldn't be here? Like we shouldn't exist? I know sometimes...Sometimes I do."

I peered up at the sky, thinking about it. I turned back to her, "Honestly? I don't think those questions have answers."

She took a bite of her stew using a pseudo spoon from Torix. The apparatus used a tiny amount of mana, letting someone wield a telekinetic array to pick up food. The artifact let Althea talk between bites, "Really? It sounds more like...You might not want answers...To those questions."

I willed mana into my legs, "Huh...Maybe, but you know what I think?"

She raised a brow, "I did just ask."

"I think we're not here for any reason. We get to decide why we exist and what for. You can make that choice or decide to coast along. I know my dad, he lost his reason to live forever ago. His body moved like a puppet attached to strings, dark ones, ones I despised. Hell, even he hated them at times."

I peered at my hands, "I never want to be like that...Like a ghost still breathing. I want to live out a good life, one worth remembering."

She glanced away, "Yeah." She turned back to me, "You sound like Leda."

I raised an eyebrow, "Who's Leda?"

"One of the other experiments. I got to talk to people when I was young, and Leda was my best friend out of the bunch. She always told me to stop crying when I was younger. Stand up. Be strong. She was like lightning in a bottle, the whole room changing when she walked in." Althea's eyes went distant,

"One time, she went away with a doctor and never came back. She wasn't special like I was." Althea closed her eyes, her voice wistful, "I already processed that awful, horrible day. I learned I'd be the last to go because everyone, and I mean everyone, was going to wither away and die...Sooner or later."

Althea peered at her finished meal, "I really, really hope I don't end up like that."

She stayed there, daydreaming about nightmares from long ago. Interrupting her trance, I raised my hands, "So, I've got a revolutionary tactic for stopping death. Want to hear it?"

She gazed up, "Sure."

"I call it not dying. I know, I know. I patented it myself."

She smirked up at me, "Heh. Tell me how that strategy works out for you."

I walked off while raising a hand, "So far so good, but I'll keep you up to date. Let me know if you find some answers to those questions you mentioned earlier too. I wouldn't mind hearing whatever it is you come up with."

Althea grumbled, "What are you about to do?"

I murmured, "I'm about to learn some magic."

36 Taking Off My Shackles

Walking off from one of many lunch conversations I had with Althea, I searched for Kessiah. She left her obelisk's field, and I set myself on learning some more augmentation magic. Althea closed the gap between us by controlling her transformations and her raw level count. A Boundless Storm, Oppression, and augmentation magic kept me in the lead. For now. If I faced off against an Althea with full damage resistance, I'd probably lose.

That pressure excited me. I bounced off my heels as I jogged over towards Kessiah. Having a rival was fun and challenging and new. It gave me a nice benchmark for checking my progress, and I enjoyed chatting about skills and tactics with Althea. With that spurring me on, I looked around for

Kessiah in the quarry. She disappeared. I looked throughout the nearby forest, finding Kessiah carving into a block of wood with her finger.

The intricate carving mirrored a sleeping child, both delicate and detailed. Kessiah hummed a lullaby as she worked, her finger hard enough to press and mold the wood through her touch alone. She had a warm, almost motherly expression on her face before my foot hit a branch around a hundred yards away.

Kessiah's eyes locked with mine, her eyes soaked in wrath. She stood, sculpture in hand, and she sprinted over. A second passed and she appeared in front of me. She hissed, "How long have you been there?"

I raised my hand, "I don't know. A few minutes, maybe?"

Her shoulders slackened before she dropped the carving beside her feet. With a quick stomp, she crushed the wood, "So what is it that you want, little guy?"

I raised a hand, ushering forth orange energy, "Ah, I was wondering if you knew anything about augmentation? I was trying to learn it and struggling during the process. Torix is busy, so I figured I'd ask you."

Her arms dropped to her side as she looked around, "Hah. That's a terrible excuse. Are you sure you're not spying for Torix or something?"

I shook my head, "I'm not. I'll keep the humming to myself."

She walked over, placed her hand onto my shoulder. Kessiah bent the shoulder plate between her fingers as she seethed, "Oh...You'd better."

I saluted at her, "I won't tell him anything...But that doesn't mean he doesn't know. You know how Torix is."

She eyed me before pushing me away, "Good point." She leaned her weight onto her hip, "Ok, I'm bored, so I *suppose* I can help you out. What exactly are you struggling with?"

I raised a hand, augmentation siphoning into my palm, "Pretty much everything. When I use augmentation, the stream of it just keeps growing until it eats through my hp bar."

She nodded, "Sounds like a classic case of battle fervor."

"Battle fervor?"

She leaned onto a tree at her side, "It's when someone likes fighting, so they get more and more into it. As their spirit rises, so does their consumption of mana. I could definitely see you having that problem."

I stared at my hand, "Any tips on how to fix it?"

She glanced up, tapping her chin with a single finger, "I mean, there aren't any easy ways of handling it. You have to be able to relax while you fight, and that can only come with a lot of practice. And I mean a lot."

I lowered my gaze and frowned, "Experience, huh?" I lifted my head and spread my arms, "What if I used dominion magic to taper down the augmentation?"

She waved the idea off, "You're an augments, not a dominion user. Just the fact you're asking for augmentation help means you can't use the other styles. Not effectively, at least. Your affinity is set in stone, so get used to it."

I shrugged, "I have a dual affinity."

Kessiah's head whipped back and she blinked a few times, "Really? You of all people? I took you for a purist augments type. Color me surprised...And your other type is dominion?"

"Yeah. It surprised me too."

Kessiah ran her fingers through her white hair, peering down at me, "That's good. Really good. Here I thought you'd be more primitive in how you fought. You know, headbutting stuff to death. I thought it'd go like this, 'Me Daniel. Me fight with fists. Me so strong.' Hah. Maybe you're more of a magician like Alfred or Torix."

I crossed my arms, "Me? Like Alfred?"

Kessiah leaned close while pulling me beside her. She whispered while cupping her hand against my ear, "Don't tell him I told you this, but Alfred had far more oomph in his magic than Torix does. His son was like you, someone with a dual affinity. It was origin and dominion."

Kessiah patted my back, knocking me forward, "Good luck living up to that guy. That's enough juicy gossip though." She opened her hands so that they faced each other. Orange mana spilled out, "Like you, I was always more of an augments myself. If you could learn dominion magic as well, that would allow you to do a lot of crazy stuff with your magic. The thing is, most melee dominion builds are based on telekinesis. You know, floating rocks or pulling people apart."

Kessiah raised a hand, narrowing her eyes. The orange mana darkened but remained distinctly orange, "There's quite a few side branches of dominion that focus on taming summoned monsters like what Torix does. With that mana type, you can turn, flip, and dip any kind of energy you want. Fire, ice, *radiation*? That's in your grasp, hon. But, you can't *make* the energy. You can only manipulate what's already there."

She sighed, "Gravity is in that long list of manipulatable energy sources, along with mind magic...Persuasive magic, controlling magic. To be frank with you, dominion is just about as varied as it gets. For an augments though, telekinesis is your bread and butter as far as the dark ooze is concerned."

She strained, veins creeping up her neck. Darkness poured into the spiraling ball of orange. The shadowy strands circled in her palms, like she was holding a tiny, dark jupiter. She strained out, "This ball right here...It would let me help augment myself...I may even move the augmented limbs with my mind."

Kessiah sighed as the ball dissipated, "But yeah, that's just theory. The idea is, instead of moving a rock over there, you move your body to help you hit harder. I've tried doing it for a while, but I just don't have any talent for dominion magic. I was much more of an augments with a little splash of origin."

She tapped my forehead and she smiled, "You'd be the perfect guinea pig for trying out all kinds of ideas I've had."

I pushed her hand off me, "Huh. It sounds like those theories are going to stay theories."

She wore a teasing grin, "Oh, don't worry. I treat my toys very well."

I rolled my eyes, "Come on. Keep it classy. Let's get back to the magic."

She frowned, "You're still no fun."

"And you're still distracting."

"Only when I wanna be." Kessiah put a palm onto a nearby tree, "So I guess the easiest way for you to learn any more about all this would be through the language of magic. That, and I'm not going to stand here all day talking to you about elementary magic. If you could write and make your own formulas, you could create rituals that make controlling augmentation a lot easier. I think that would be the quickest way to progress."

I grimaced, "That...That sounds hard."

She pushed herself off her tree, and she wrote into it with a fingertip. Strips of wood fell at her feet. After a few minutes of this, a series of fifty characters exposed themselves on the wood, the symbols more complex than letters. She pushed her hand into the tree, the wood splintering as she scooped out the wood with her bare hands. A quick rip and pop later, she offered the wooden slab to me, sap still dripping.

She frowned at the sap, "This is the alphabet for magic's language. It's Schema's public diction, and it's a lot, lot more complex than the simple stuff you use in your own backwater, primitive writing."

I took the wood, "What's with hurling all the insults about my planet, eh? Earth isn't so bad, and it's not overrun by eldritch like a lot of places."

She shook her head, "When, well, *if* you get to see other planets some day, you'll understand what I mean. Besides that, there's no guarantee that Earth won't be overrun."

I narrowed my eyes, "We'll see about that."

She smirked down at me, but I let it go. I glanced down at the hunk of wood. Each character on it carried some kind of radiating emotion, the symbol surging out with feeling and sensation alike. With fifty symbols in total, some of the etchings took on nuanced sentiments. Primal emotions, like sadness or anger, carried the simplest symbols. More complex emotions, like disdain, contempt, or nostalgia, owned complex characters.

This language took it a step further, however. A few carried the sensation of a color. One symbol reminded me of the color blue, both calm and soothing. Another reminded me of red, being full of wrath and passion. Eying it all closely, it reminded me of art, each image coming together in my hands.

Kessiah picked at her ear, "Boring, isn't it?"

I gawked at the etchings, "What? No. This is...It's like I'm holding a symphony in my hands."

Kessiah stuck her tongue out in disgust, "By Baldowah, are you serious? Gah, lame."

She mentioned an Old One like it was referencing a religion. Getting used to ignoring her jabs, I spotted a notification in the corner of my vision.

Skill gained! Comprehension of Oblivion(Ivl 1) - You've stepped into the unknown. Now you must learn to see in the dark. +1% to comprehension of oblivion.

Returning to the markings, I lost myself staring at the alphabet. The sigils carried great power, though they lacked the same primal edge that Baldag-Ruhl's runes harbored within them. These markings gave out the same waves of emotion that a favorite song evoked. The symbols captured memories, some of them nostalgic like a bittersweet fog. The etchings put feelings into words in ways that normal languages couldn't.

And in that, they defied reason.

The essence of the designs could tell stories that words never could. Someone could show color to the blind or demonstrate sound to the deaf. A master of the markings may even transmit the wonder of a mountain's view or the majesty of a symphony. Getting lost in that latent potential, I ogled the etchings for a few minutes. They took my breath away.

Kessiah snapped me out of my daydreaming,

"What's the big deal? You've seen them before, haven't you?"

I squinted at them, "I haven't."

Kessiah raised her brow, "Oh really? Then what was in BloodHollow?"

I blinked, "Something else. This is like a lake of crystal clear water. The Runes in BloodHollow were like a deep, dark ocean. This makes sense, but I couldn't grasp whatever Baldag-Ruhl was doing. It seemed...Unknowable."

Kessiah scratched the side of her head, "So...I didn't think you'd be the type of person to marvel at this kind of thing."

I tore my eyes from the runes, "To be honest, me neither."

Kessiah placed a hand over one of the characters and laid it onto the center of my chest. With a burst of colorless mana, a vision of an egg hatching came through me. That passed, and other images of a mother holding a newborn baby popped into my vision. The mom and the child owned violet red skin, like Kessiah.

The image faded. Kessiah smirked, "From my experience, words can't transmit the meaning of this language like mana can. That's what Schema made it for anyways. I'll give you a transmission of each character, and that should give you a general feel for each."

She took another character, pulsed it through me. Lightning burst. A spark of fire ignited. In the distance, the explosion of a far off supernova roared into space. I marveled, overwhelmed in awe. The feeling passed, and I nodded, "Woah...give me a minute. That hit me harder than I expected. If I'm honest, both of them did."

She snickered at me, "Hah. It's like a shot of Sorekai cactus juice, isn't it?"

I shook the sensations from my head, "Does that juice show you memories?"

Kessiah pursed her lips, "What do you mean memories? You're hallucinating?"

I shrugged, "Yeah, that's happening with each image. The mana comes across as a series of flashbacks or something. It's all very vivid and intense."

She grinned, "Ohhh, really? That's a bit, hm, unusual. Well, you're going to have fun with a few of these then."

If a picture was worth a thousand words, these memories were worth millions. Each character slammed into me like reading a book in an instant. One crept through the back of my mind like a deep dread. It inched forth like knowing the date of my death. Another echoed in like the vigor before a fight or the anticipation before a test. One of the last symbols roared out in a thunderous rage, the savagery irreconcilable and bloody. It left me blinded, everything red and gory.

Each glyph boomed and crashed with explosive emotions. I stood on wobbling knees by the time we finished the entire fifty character set. I even vomited water when shown the character for disgust. With a fresh sheen of sweat on my forehead, I wheezed,

"Ugh...I hope writing it's easier...What a ridiculous learning process."

Kessiah crossed her arms, "Most people don't learn it like that. They learn a character's meaning then the standard formulas each. After a few years of writing with the language, they gain a firm understanding of it and can start forming their own spells. At that point, the emotional kick is set up to spur the mind into action. It evokes a lot of will in someone."

She squinted at me, "It's a sharp but necessary part of the process...But uh, usually it's not this intensive. Not by a longshot. Psh, you look like someone stole your soul."

After taking a few breaths, I walked over towards a tree and sat down. As I heaved, Kessiah waved a hand, "Ok, cool. I'll, uh...See you around."

I waved with weakness, "Yeah...For sure."

I let myself get my bearings before searching for the feeling of the first character. Sharpening my fingertip, I used it like a chisel. I couldn't remember the rune's form, so my scribbling came out all wrong. When I looked at the sigil and tried recreating it, it came out all wrong. Kessiah explained this was the way to learn it, but something nagged in the back of my mind. Compared to Baldag's runes, these were shallow imitations of something far more real and far more powerful.

Despite my unease, a notification pinged.

Skill Gained! Carving Into Oblivion(Ivl 1) - You've gained the means into another world. +1% effectiveness of runic carvings and their longevity.

With the skill learned, I kept on trying to write the sigils, even moving towards full words after a few hours. I memorized the lettering fast, my attributes helping me out some. In time, I left several trees covered in the markings. My head pulsed with a headache, and my mind dulled out with exhaustion. Having a plan of what to do next, I extended a sharp blade from my armor.

I sliced several plates of wood from the trunks of trees for later practice. I found a shelf of mud surrounded by bushes and trees. There I settled myself in for a long night. I gave myself a few slaps to focus my attention, and I set to work. Hunched over that tree, hours passed while I carved the runes out, learning the language.

My eyes glazed over after a while, my attention lapsing. I gave myself mental slaps to get my brain going when I caught myself daydreaming. I scheduled breaks every now and then, letting my mind rest. Eventually, my finger ached after several hours, but merely slowed me down. It never stopped me.

With a little stream of augmentation mana from my right hand, I lit my workplace while I carved with my left hand. The various words took firmer shape. The symbols cleared up. Of course, they lacked the precision of Kessiah's characters, but I accumulated definite progress. As the morning sun rose, I stacked fifty or so plates of wood around me.

Peering around, gashes and scars lingered across the treescape. The poor trunks served as my chosen material, the cutting of the wood serving as a solid break. During those lulls, I considered

what each character needed to improve. Before writing sentences, I wanted a complete and utter understanding of the sigils before I tried making my own formulas.

Like a good job, my knowledge about the basic characters would serve as a strong foundation for my future. In no context would understanding these letters hurt my progress. It was like swimming across the ocean. I needed to know where to go and how, but first, I had to learn to swim. So swim I did until the next day.

By the time I headed back to camp, a midday sunshine poured over everyone. Althea reformed her hand into a variety of nasty looking blades while Torix carved in the background. He continued running calculations and making more marble for his work. His progress and diligence inspired me, the guy prolific as people come. Kessiah lazed about in her obelisk, either asleep or doing little worthy of note.

That's how she chose to spend her time, so I tried not to judge.

Hopping down into the quarry's depths, I passed large patches of the walls covered in the ensuing characters. Having written some myself, the sheer difficulty of Torix's incantation floored me. The guy's glyphs surpassed Kessiah's ten times over, the lich's decisive and precise movements yielding better results. Marveling at them, Torix's precision illustrated a night and day difference.

Kessiah didn't write so much as sketch the language out. On the other hand, Torix stuck with Schema's diagram like a drowning person did with the air in their lungs. I watched Torix carve for a few minutes, spellbound now that I understood his mastery. In that instant, an idea popped into my head. I sprinted back towards my spot in the forest.

I resolved myself to compose these letters as Torix did: perfectly. I sat in place, not leaving it for several days, outside of lunches with Althea or Torix. I woke up, carved into the sheets of wood, then went to sleep. Every now and again, Kessiah stopped by to check on me. She stopped coming after a while, always finding me hunched over a plate working with a frenzy in my eyes.

Boring Kessiah like a broken record would, I hammered away at the monotonous task. I lingered over the duty for so long that everything else devolved into a misty haze. I forgot to eat or sleep for days at a time during this process. My obsession engulfed me for a while, but it yielded sweet, delicious fruit.

My engravings turned intense. They evolved from the scribbles of a child to the prose of a professional. I fell deeper, further absorbed in the process. I walked into trees and lost track of where I physically was. From my normal self, I shifted into an airy professor at some college. Something about the runes just sucked me in, and I relished that sensation. Having a purpose and a drive gave me meaning. It silenced my doubts. It left me alive and in the moment.

What more could I ask for?

During that haze, I took a few breaks. I wandered off into some of the nearby dungeons. The low-level monsters took no effort to clear out, but the dungeons still cleared my mind. The fights acted as hard, mental resets. Unnerving signs of Yawm's presence leaked out as I ventured. Some

kind of forest formed in the middle of Springfield, monsters shambling in the yellowed trees. I got close at times but kept my distance.

I wanted nothing less than to be captured by a guy called Yawm of Flesh. Anything he wanted sounded pretty bad to me. His scouts no longer searched the area with the same fervor as before, the minions clashing with Torix's forces. Our lich led his soldiers to victory each and every time, the necromancer skilled at tactics and battle. According to Torix, the Force of Iron wasn't so lucky.

The generic, Schema led guild lacked sound leadership, not that I knew much of anything about them. I still hadn't seen them yet. They set up shop in the industrial district of Springfield, far from our camp. Torix warned Althea and I against nearing the Force of Iron yet, as their technology gave them the ability to kill me. They'd do it too; it was a part of being an unknown.

At some point, I'd meet that guild, but postponing that date some did me quite a few favors. In fact, time marched forward with a steady thump, and it unnerved me. I was a small, insignificant ant in the grand scheme of Schema's universe. To get out from under other's heels, I would need to push myself and hard.

A little bribery never hurt anything either. Trying to get on the Force of Iron's good side, I gifted them a dungeon core. I had Torix edit a message and write it with some mana infused ink. He sent a summoned eagle towards the Force of Iron's base of operations. The mana Torix used radiated augmentation, the lich mirroring my own mana signature. A skilled professional could tell the difference but not anyone in this new branch.

The entire reason for the energy came from a desire for sincerity; the mana acted as a calling card for it. After establishing a relationship with the Force of Iron, I kept my head down and focused on leveling my various skills for the runes. The skill names carried a lot of awe and ambience, but for the life of me, I couldn't tell what they really meant. Carving Into Oblivion? Comprehension of Oblivion? I lacked any understanding of why Schema named them that.

Oddly enough, neither did Torix. It was one mystery among many.

Enigma or not, I directed all my efforts into carving those sigils into hard wood then soft stone. At the two week mark, the plates turned to cast iron that Torix gave me. At three weeks, I hit a breakthrough, and my carving changed. When I wrote each character, I emboldened the sigils with my memories. I correlated those events to the emotions of each magical marking. If it was a rune of rage, I dwelled on my father. If it was a rune of sadness, I remembered my mother by her hospital bed.

Exhausting, biting, and personal, those memories washed over me in waves. They metamorphosed the runes, giving them a weight they otherwise lacked. With that technique in tow, I tried out my first working line of the language. I inscribed sigils about power and how it consumed and overwhelmed. The passage went on, casting the calm of a clear ocean and the silence of an empty field. At the end of the written letters, it told the tale of two perfect opposites, each incomplete without the other.

The runes flared in furious fire before diving into a deep cold, like a wild, frenzied animal calming at its master's touch. After all my weeks of practice, these few lines acted as the culmination of my efforts. Compared to my old school work, I'd never worked this hard on anything in my life, scholastically speaking.

Finishing the sheet, I lifted it up, inspecting it with a burst of pride and pop of joy. This was what living was all about. Excitement overriding reason, I channeled my mana through the runes. They glowed a blazing orange before a surge of power coursed through my muscles and bones. Arcs of sun shaded lightning streaked across my skin as a dark fire ebbed inside my chest. The rush of power was palpable, a torrent, an unending might.

And in seconds, the wood burned away in my hands. It burst in a frenzy of flames before I gawked at the ashes in my palm, my jaw slack with surprise. The slab crumbled, the gray ash powdering in the gentle wind. That rush burned through a tenth of my health. I laughed at myself, enjoying the wicked onslaught's aftermath.

It was incredible.

And it needed work. I frowned before picking up an unused iron plate. After spending half an hour carving the sentence into the slab, I channeled the mana once more. Less vitality poured out, though the consumption of mana still exceeded my health regen. Even with the pacifying aura, the battle fervor overcame me, building until the ritual devastated my blood and bones. That happened despite the incantation's focus on controlling my energy output.

Worse still, the plate in my palms turned white hot in a few minutes. After half an hour, it deformed into a warped clump. After stomping out a few tufts of fire, I brainstormed for a solution. Steel might work better, but etching into it took forever. Torix mentioned his plate reserves were limited as well, the lich not having an unlimited supply. The economics of the situation played out against me in the end.

But my mind lingered on the surge of strength. It sifted, a seductive, tantalizing sense of possibility. That latent potential lingered at my fingertips, but circumstance stopped me from accessing it. I lacked the materials to make the most of my newfound skills, and I bristled at the thought of that. Frustration gave way to an epiphany as ideas flourished in my mind.

I lacked any material around me that might work for the runes, but I didn't lack that material in me. I stared down at my arm, the dull, dark gray metal sheening. I smiled at the substance, remembering how I always regenerated no matter how grievous the wound. I was about to see if that idea held up under scrutiny.

Lots of it.