

## 41 Haven From Hell

I waited there for a while, observing both of them. The symptoms of the petal bugs infection riddled them from head to toe, and it left me wondering what I could've done to stop it. I considered and rewound what I said and did in the conversation with them. In the end, I came up with no real answers. Despite what happened to them, I still resented them and how they treated me.

However, at no point did I ever hate them. Peering at the both of them, I wondered about Michael's family back in their lodge. They probably all died already. I rubbed my temples as memories of camping trips with Michael rushed in. I didn't remember his mom or sister that clearly, but his father's face lingered in my mind.

The guy was a family man down to his roots. He lacked ambition for standard career paths and whatnot, but the guy always worked hard to give his family a good life. In all honesty, I envied Michael on that front. Knowing that he died left me heavy and listless. A harsh reality set in, and I wallowed in it for a while.

I didn't stay in that dark place. Peering back up at Michael and Kelsey, I held a measure of faith in saving them. Torix's medicinal knowledge and magical skill gave us a serious edge in bringing Michael and Kelsey back, and my armor may save them if I could get it to eat only the insects. Those odds for the situation instilled some hope in me, though I kept that hope measured.

Considering everything that happened, I still lacked confidence moving forward. Getting out of that dark place, I paced into the back hallway. Torix's design gave the underground lair a druidic feel to it, elegant roots composing archways everywhere. Support beams made of gnarled tree roots held each room upright. I passed the doorway to my own room, my name etched with mana overhead along with the title of disciple.

I smiled at that.

Yellow honeysuckle bloomed from the strands of wood, the leaves and flowers blocking the doorway. I pulsed mana into the plantlife, and it moved on its own. Walking inside, the honeysuckle closed behind me. All the sound from outside ceased in an instant. A bed of soft, dark moss nuzzled into the corner of my room, along with a plate of polished steel for a mirror.

When I sat down, the moss was soft as silk. I crossed my arms before leaning down onto my knees. I tapped my head against my knees, the clanking of my armor turning into a dull hum over time. That's when my mind wandered. I dwelled on everything that happened, and hours passed by as I did. Not needing sleep, I processed most of what happened while awake. I still rested there, unmoving yet somehow restless.

A thud echoed in from the door of plants. I raised my head, "Who is it?"

To my surprise, Althea's voice leaked through the brush, "Uhm, it's me. I wanted to talk for a minute."

Wondering what she wanted, I stood and opened the plants with mana. They responded to my touch, unfurling in an elegant flow. Althea stood in a fitted robe, smiling up at me. She hid something behind her back, and I raised a brow, wondering what it was. Her grin being infectious, I smiled back at her, "You look ecstatic. What's up with you?"

She pushed herself up onto her toes, "Nothing. Well, there's something, and uh, I wanted to show it to you. Do you have some time?"

Peering away, a piece of me wanted to be alone. It wanted to crawl into a hole and just lay there forever. I pushed that part of me down before turning back to Althea. I scoffed, "You know what? All I really have now is time. Whatever it is, let's do it."

She pulled a dusty, old game of bingo out from behind her back. She pushed it out to me while brimming with excitement, "It's that game you mentioned forever ago. I found it."

I blinked, blown away. Not only had she remembered the game, she found it too. I raised a brow at the old box, "Huh. Wow. It really is the game." I peered under the box, "There's supposed to be a ball turner thingy. Where is it?"

Althea pulled out a bingo ball spinner, a chunk of wood still attached from where she tore it out of a table. Someone bolted the metal turner to a table, but Althea ripped it out. Leaning back, I laughed for a long while. I kept laughing until I cried. I wiped away a tear while Althea narrowed her eyes at me, a bit peeved,

"I thought you liked the game? What's so funny?"

I picked up the ball turner, "Before Schema's system arrived, the idea of tearing this out of the wood would've been absurd. You never even thought to unbolt it, and that makes perfect sense. I don't know, seeing those ideas clash was funny."

Althea shrugged, "Ok, well, wanna play?"

I flicked the metal turner, balls flinging everywhere, "Hm, you know people only played this when they were bored, right?"

Althea snatched the ball turner from me, "Ok, so it's perfect for us. I know I'm bored."

I pursed my lips, "Huh...Point taken."

We set the game down, and I pulled up the scoresheets, the old crayons, and the other supplies. It took a few minutes of explanation and examples before Althea got the hang of it. Simple as the game was, Althea never really played any games when she was a child. This was her first seeing anything like this, so it took some time to establish the terminology and whatnot.

She got the hang of it after a few minutes, however, and I turned the bingo ball spinner for a few seconds before pulling out a ball. I picked it up and said, "Six G."

Althea raised her hands in anticipation, "Hah! I've got it. What do I do again?"

I pointed at the mark on her sheet, "You mark that."

She slashed across the paper with a crayon, "Ok. What next?"

I twisted the ball roller once more, "We go for another round."

She leaned over the ball roller, "Oh I can't wait."

Somehow, Althea stayed engaged with the game, maintaining her thrill the entire time. It baffled my expectations, but in a refreshing kind of way. As we played, she and I chatted away. For the most part, we kept the conversation light. It revolved around our builds, skills, and certain trees. After a while, Althea peered up from her score sheet and looked me in the eye. She raised an eyebrow,

"Uhm, how are you holding up?"

I frowned, "Hm...Better than I thought I would."

That was kind of a lie. Althea leaned onto a hand with her cheek, "That's good. Er, great really. I thought you'd be more, I don't know...falling apart. You seem fine, at least on the surface."

I rolled the bingo ball roller again, playing because she wanted to. After a ball flung out, I weighed my hands back and forth, "It's Schema's system holding me together. I chose a willpower perk recently, and since then, my mind feels like granite."

She tilted her head at me, "Really? If you ask me, you always came across like that, even before now. You always stuck it out. To me, at least."

I leaned back onto my hands, peering up, "Maybe. I think the system is doing the majority of the legwork though."

Althea furrowed her brow, "I don't know about that. Look at Kessiah. She's gotta have more willpower than you, but she's still way lazier."

I raised a hand, "But what about Torix? That guy's a machine. He never stops working."

Althea tilted her head, "I guess, but I think he works hard even considering how much willpower he has. That's probably why he has such a high level and so many useful skills. He uses his mind as much as he can, but like, Kessiah doesn't. At all...It's frustrating to watch sometimes."

I peered at my sheet, "She's still the strongest among us."

Althea pursed her lips, "Yeah, but I taled to Torix about her being a remnant. They're born with genetic modifications, and that makes them, er, start with a lot levels or something. It's complicated, but think of it like Schema's system is more of a supplement to them."

My eyes widened, "Really?"

Althea shrugged, "Apparently, Kessiah was over level two thousand by the time she was twenty years old. That wasn't from clearing dungeons either. Schema just gave it to her."

I blinked, "Wow...That's a hell of a head start. She's so much stronger than us."

Althea put a lock of hair behind her ear, "But how long will that last, you know? I think both of us will beat her out...In the long run...Maybe the really long run for me."

Remembering the bodies in Springfield, I sighed, "Man, if we survive long enough for that to happen, I'd call us blessed."

Althea pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. She wrestled with an idea in her mind, her face showing several expressions. After half a minute, she murmured, "I, uhm...I wanted to apologize for getting you wrapped up in this Yawm situation. I feel like it's my fault."

I scoffed, "What? Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? I landed here, and the Yawm guy sent in reinforcements to come get me. That's why he's here in the first place."

I shook my head, "I don't think so. You may be valuable, but there's no way Yawm would send this many reinforcements to get you alone. Yawm knows about the dimensional tears that happened here, and I think he wants to know what happened. Why? I can't guess just yet, but it has to revolve around my armor."

I put all my weight onto one arm while lifting the other one, "I was called by Etorhma after all, and Yawm's connected to Etorhma some which way. We'll have to figure all of that out by peeling his organization apart. We'll find some clues, and answers will come from them. Either way, you don't owe me an apology. If anything, you joining us really helps us out. It's one less person on their side and one more on ours."

Althea's eyes brightened. She chimed, "Huh...I never thought about it like that."

I picked up the bingo ball, "Is that why you brought me this whole bingo thing?"

Althea blushed, "Of...Of course. That's exactly why."

I rolled my eyes, "Uh huh. You sure you didn't just want to try it out?"

She hid a smile behind her knees, "Ok...Maybe a little."

I met her eyes, "Good. You should do more stuff for you sometimes. If you ask me, you don't owe any of us anything, so it's good you're doing something for yourself for a change. Hell, in my opinion, we shouldn't take you for granted because being taken for granted sucks." I remembered Michael and Kelsey. I simmered while picking up the bingo ball,

"Trust me, I know all about it...Nine B."

She scratched in a little mark on her sheet before swaying back and forth, "Yeah. You do."

We played another few rounds before Althea tapped her legs with her fingertips. She murmured, "Er, thanks for always saying stuff like that. Sometimes, I'll be thinking a lot, and I'll get in my head about everything. I end up thinking one thing, then I'll think about another and...I end up feeling really down. Talking to you cheers me up."

Her words warmed me, "Really? Me?"

"Yeah."

I tried stopping a grin, and I looked away. No matter my efforts, my smile was irrepressible, rising up to the corner of my eyes. I covered my mouth with a hand, "You're...You're welcome. I'm glad I can pay you back some for doing stuff like this."

Althea leaned her chin onto her knees, a mischievous grin on her lips, "Remember, it's like you said. I did this for me."

From the corner of my eye, I looked at her, "Yeah, but this worked out for me too. I needed something to take the edge off, and this worked like a charm."

Althea tilted her head, "Glad to hear it...Are you going to roll the ball thing?"

I shook my head, blushing a bit after staring at Althea for a while. I tapped the edge of my forehead, "Sorry about that. I got distracted."

Althea flushed, her silvery skin flushing red. She peered away, "Oh."

A tense silence passed between us before I rolled the bingo ball roller with excessive speed, "Oh man, we have *got* to get on with this game, right?"

She scratched her cheek, “Uhm, absolutely. For sure.”

A few more rounds passed, and we chatted for a while. The tension eased, and we got back into the swing of the game. In time, I stared down at an empty scoresheet, “Man, luck’s not on my side today.”

Althea leaned over her slip, “I’m close to another win.”

I tilted my head at her, “Huh...What about we make this more interesting?”

She blinked, “How?”

“Hm, if I win, you’ll have to help me train for a month.”

Althea’s face wrinkled in disgust, “Oh, that sounds terrible.”

I shrugged, “Yeah, but if you win, you’ll get something too.”

“Ooh...Like what?”

I tilted my head, “I don’t know. What would you want?”

Althea tapped her chin, thinking for a while. Her eyes widened as she swung her arm, “If I win, you have to show me more of your world’s *stuff*. Like other games or food.”

I reached out a hand, “It’s a deal.”

A moment passed as she stared at my palm. I motioned it, “You’re supposed to shake it. This is my world’s stuff.”

She stuck out her hand, grabbing mine at the wrong angle. Althea wobbled her hand in different directions before I burst into a laugh. She frowned at me, “What? I shook it like you said.”

I smiled, grabbing her hand, “It’s like this.”

We did a proper handshake, my palm guiding hers on the proper path. She mouthed, “Ooh. That’s how.”

She held my hand for a while before I raised my brows, “You can let me go now.”

Her hand flashed back, and her face flushed again, “Oh...Ok.”

We played another few rounds before I gained on her. The cards played out in my favor, and I filled out my scoresheet over the next dozen rounds. Before we knew it, both of our sheets filled out to their utmost extent, and each number called could result in a victory. Althea leaned over

her sheet, her eyes wide with fear at the prospect of helping me train for a full month. Me? I had nothing to lose either way, so I stayed relaxed.

Althea's eyes bored a hole through her sheet as I picked up the last bingo ball. I stared at it, and the number filled out the last row of my sheet. All I needed to do was say the number aloud, and I gained Althea as my training assistant for a full month. Feeling good, I took a breath, amped and ready to relish my victory.

Before I said the number aloud, I caught a glimpse of Althea's face. She teemed with an unbridled excitement, an almost childish wonder in the game. She wanted the win, sure, but more than anything, Althea desired a view of the outside world. If bingo got her this excited, imagine scrabble or some other old, boring-ish board game. The possibilities were endless!

Sarcasm aside, I paused for a second. I stared at her sheet, and I said,

"Nine K."

She raised her hands, shouting and jumping for joy. I flopped the ball back into the basket before she found out that I lied about the game's result. I threw my hands up, "Gah, you got me."

She pointed at me, "Hah. Now you have to show me all kinds of stuff. Like food. And I want it freshly cooked too." Awareness crossed over her, replacing the childish joy. She coughed into a hand, "Ahem...I-if you want to."

I gave her a warm smile, "Absolutely." I pushed myself up, "Thanks for the game. This was fun."

Althea yawned, "Yeah, same here."

I raised a brow, "You're going to need your sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us."

She grabbed the sides of her head, "You're right. Do you mind cleaning this all up? I'll do it next time."

"It's not a problem at all. Go get some shut eye."

She stepped up to the honeysuckle doorway. As she left, she grinned, "You, uhm...Sleep well too. Or train. Or whatever you like doing."

"You too."

She left the room, leaving warmth as she did. I soaked it in, appreciating her coming here like that. It ended a horrible day with a great evening, and I would've just dwelled on what happened for a long while otherwise. Instead, I stretched my arms and legs, rearing and ready to work

hard through the night. I cleaned up the bingo game, making certain that every part of it fitted into its appropriate slot.

I carved out a section in the wall before putting the game there. Scared it would collapse or get the game dirty, I spent thirty minutes making a reinforced shelf out of torn parts of my armor. After situating it so that it wouldn't be harmed, I sat myself down with my legs crossed. I took a breath, getting ready to get a feel for my extra mana reserves.

When I ran here, I used more mana than before, but I kept some in reserve. This time, I aimed to get as much out of my enhanced health regeneration as possible. By getting an intuitive understanding of the sensation, my usability for my mana would rise by leaps and bounds. Making that happen, I revved my augmentation into action. It flared to life, a blazing orange plume radiating out of each arm.

I kept my eyes closed, honing my mind onto converting as much of my body and blood and bones as I could. Those physical parts of me relented, converting into mana with ease. I kept surging the energies, rotating and getting a feel for them over the next hour. After two hours, I reached the apex of my current ability.

I trembled under it.

The rippling force of the mana left me motivated and starving for action of any kind. I wanted to jump, move, and fight. I needed an outlet, my hands clasp with white knuckled fury. Leaning down, I tried dampening the energy's flow. It waned down in a slow ebb before surging once more. I leaned back from myself, stunned by the energy fighting me like this.

Redoubling my efforts, I gritted my teeth while willing the energy to stop. It bowed down, but it continued its surge. Grabbing my knees, I clasped my hands with all my strength, roaring at the energy flow to stop. Unable to withstand my howl, the spiraling mana relented. It dwindled and receded, no longer pulling at my body to sustain itself.

As it lessened into a trickle, sweat beaded on my forehead. I gasped for air, the sheer deluge of mana overwhelming my initial attempts at containing it. It fed on my flesh and bones, the mass of energy taking on a life of its own. After a certain amount of mass, the mana could direct itself. After gaining some confidence, the ball of mental thoughts directed itself against me. The sensation reminded me of blacking out while fighting monsters in Springfield.

Leaning back, I wondered if that's what happened to me. Testing the hypothesis, I took a breath, summoning another storm of energy. I rose the trickle up slowly, probing the mana fueling me. The desire to roam rampant and move flowed over me like jumping in a basin of bloodlust and motivation. I smiled at it, thinking of how this supplemented my natural ambitions and desire to improve. Even on its own, that was useful.



Taking another moment, I channeled the energy through myself for a while. It burned through my health regen, slowing my rate of healing. Even more pressing, heat built in my room and on my skin. Eventually, my blood and skin sizzled from the mana overflow. I scoffed as the mana overwhelmed my ability to regenerate. In a violent, decisive jerk, I quelled the mana storm with a mental whip.

This time, I left nothing on the table, so the mana gave in from my first strike. I let myself cool down over the next few minutes, mentally and physically. I cycled this control of mana, wrestling with the mana storms as I called them. It acted like walking a tightrope, and in time, it turned comfortable. A couple of hours later, I rolled my shoulders and stood up tall. Taking a break from mana control, I paced out towards Torix and Kessiah.

Kessiah left the mana pool, going who knows where. Torix established an evil lair in his corner of the central area, creating graphs, charts, and maps showcasing Springfield in its entirety. Up until recently, the ritual chained the poor necromancer down, but without that consuming him, his full abilities unleashed. That manifested with plots, plans, and machinations of all kinds. Thinking those up, Torix paced back and forth while staring at a map.

I walked up and raised a hand to him, "Yo. What are you working on?"

Torix tilted his head at me, "Hm...You're still awake? You couldn't sleep, I'll assume."

I shook my head, "I don't need to anymore."

Torix's fire eyes flared bright, "You...You chose the *willpower* perk? You of all people?"

I spread my hands, "Uh, yeah. What's surprising about that?"

Torix peered off, "I...Hm, I expected you to simply invest into endurance, strength, and dexterity like most fighters do. That creates a durable, strong core of attributes to rely on. Why did you side with willpower?"

I put my hands on my hips, "I wanted more of it."

Torix stared at me like I dumped a bunch of black slush on his maps. Torix murmured, "Hm. That's a rather simple stratagem, don't you think?"

I shrugged, "Occam's razor. Most of the time, the simplest answer is the best one. When I saw the perk, I wanted and needed it. Boom, I selected it."

Torix pushed up his glasses, "I-I shall refrain from judging you for that reasoning...Ahem, at least as much as I am able to." Torix stood back up, "Then did you walk out of here as a break for whatever training you've devised?"

I pursed my lips, "You could say that." I gestured to the maps, "What's all this?"

Torix snapped his view to his charts, and he spread his arms with a dramatic flair, "Ah, this? Why, I'm so glad you asked. You see, this is a series of charts detailing the habits and locations of Yawm's Followers along with supply routes his force has established. I've learned that our enemy is disorganized as Yawm has hidden himself within a world tree of some sort."

I raised a brow, "Like Yggdrasil?"

Torix tilted his head, "Is that a fictional being or?"

I peered off, "You know, maybe. Eldritch are real, so why not mythical gods? Anyways, Yggdrasil is a god of the world in, er, I think it's the vikings' mythos, whatever that is."

Torix grabbed his chin, "Ah yes, you mentioned them before. They were tribal, bloodthirsty battlers. Schema would shine favor on those clansmen no doubt. Regardless, charting these locations tells me that Yawm's forces splinter apart often and by large distances. This makes eradicating them down to the last woman and child quite simple."

A chill ran down my spine as Torix scoffed, "If Yawm left any children alive, that is."

I frowned as Torix sighed. He shook his head, "Hah...It would seem that few sentients appreciate a bit of dark humor. Regardless, our force is far smaller than Yawm's. However, their forces splinter far more than ours will, and those split pieces can be taken care of promptly. You and Althea shall gain many levels from doing so, and even Kessiah and I will as well."

Torix's eyes flared a bloody red as he raised his hands, "And as with all conquerors, we shall stand on a bridge of their corpses. They will become fuel for our survival, a potent elixir to empower and embolden us...It shall be delightful."

Staring at Torix, he seemed bigger than I remembered him being. Not physically, but his presence as a whole. The more I understood him, the more he reminded me of pictures of space. It was like I gazed at something I couldn't fully comprehend. Not yet, at least. I put my hands on my hips, "Man. You really thought this through, huh?"

Torix cackled before peering at me, "I most certainly have. It's exciting, isn't it?"

Intimidated but full of anticipation, I nodded, "It is."

Torix rubbed his hands together, stepping over towards all of the marks, "Perhaps you'd enjoy an explanation on where, why, when, and how their units move as they do. Having a lesser commander-"

I waved my hands, "Hell no. Please. No."

Torix's hands plopped onto his sides, "Oh...That's a tad bit disappointing. I'd formulated quite a few lectures on just that topic, actually."

I scratched the side of my head, "For me, I was wondering if you knew anything about the runes. I feel like I'm good at them, and I was wondering if there was anything else I could do with them? You know, besides writing them into my armor."

Torix's teaching mode returned in full force, "Ooh, so that's what you desire to know. Well then, the real question you must ask is what *can't* you do with them? They may serve any means and purpose you could desire so long as the creativity and ability for their creation is present. Here—" Torix reached up a hand, a portal appearing above me. A pile of books spilled out and Torix spread his hands,

"These books will teach you the primary conventions regarding current runic writing philosophies."

A pit in my stomach formed as I held about twenty books in my arms. A bead of cold sweat poured from my brow as I gasped, "So, do I have to read all of this?"

Torix tilted his head, "What? Why, of course you do. These are the initial readings. Seeing as you don't need any sleep, you should take advantage of that opportunity. Besides that, what else will you do with your time?"

I raised my brows, "I don't know...Actually practice stuff instead of reading about it?"

Torix waved away my statement with the brush of his hand, "Scholars fight with the written word, not their fists. Being my disciple, you'll learn this truth one bundle of books at a time."

I turned to my room, my shoulders slumping. Getting there, I sat down and pulled up the thinnest book. Schema converted the language for me, forming systemized text on top of the alien characters. They gave clear, concise translations of the esoteric, alien ideas. Barely touching on the thoughts of the book, I leaned my face into my hands. I let out a deep sigh.

It was going to be a long night.

## 42 Breaking the Rules

I scanned through a few of the books over the next few hours. It took a bit, but I got an idea of what the meta was for rune writing. None of it meshed in with what I understood about the process. Everything in a textbook applied but only in a vacuum, not in actual practice. It was the oddest thing I found about lots of texts. They dished out dense clusters of information, yet somehow, none of it ever applied to whatever I studied.

Even worse, this book mentioned mana channeling as a foolhardy, dangerous venture. Because of that, it gave no advice on the matter. It did warn why doing so was dangerous, however. The main

reason culminated from the actual energy radiating through a person's body. A sort of magical friction occurred, some of the ambient power flooding in.

It was a lot like running power through a wire. If I sent too much mana, this magical friction increased. This heated the user's body, eventually boiling their blood and brittling their bones. My channeling proved twice as dangerous, as I not only risked cooking myself. I used my own body to cook myself. It was like getting an oven to turn it on. In fact, the only reason my sigil markings worked at all was because of my unique circumstances.

My armor augmented my durability, and the metal acted as a great conductor for mana. That lessened the magical friction quite a bit. I also stockpiled regeneration, letting me undo most of the damage I dealt to myself. Even better, the runes acted as an insulator for this energy, stopping it from coursing through my actual body. The mental sensations I experienced came about because of mana overflowing and leaking out of those runes.

That came from my lack of experience. These books supplemented that experience for a normal magician, but they carried no context for my situation. In fact, they made the assumption no one could channel mana into themselves safely, so the books barely mentioned these ideas in any depth. They only rambled a bit about how terrible an idea it was. They never even got to using an actual *soul* for this channeling technique. That was beyond madness, according to the books.

And that was the reason these books served no real purpose for me. They focused a lot on overcoming limitations I simply didn't have. So, instead of listening to a bunch of close minded philosophers, I set up shop and got to work. I channeled mana through a hand, loosening my skin's grip on my armor. A couple violent ruptures later, and I amassed a pile of black metal. This was also likely not recommended by the books either.

But I digress.

Picking up a piece of dark metal, I turned it in my hand. It shined with a matte finish, kind of like a polished magnet. It stayed strut after trying to bend it, the skin actually becoming more robust since I leveled up. Placing my palm on a plate, I shoved down. It gave a bit, but proved harder than cast iron. It still lacked steel's robustness, however. A few evolutions might change that.

Putting a hand over a different plate, I reached out to mold the armor as I did with the stuff all over me. It wobbled, though only by the slightest margin. If anything, it matched a vibration more than a motion. As before, evolving my armor would enhance my control further. With enough mastery, I might even bend different runic inscriptions into the armor after taking it off. That brought a smile to my face.

Explosive spears, sharpened shards, even shining swords, all of that weaponry could come from my skin. With runic inscriptions, I may even detonate those weapons when they impacted monsters. That exceeded my potential at the time, so I kept working within my limits. I amassed a big pile of the metal. Such a tall stack, actually, that it weighed as much as I did. Gawking down at my armor, I discovered that I lacked hunger at all.

Raising a brow, I rubbed my temples. This whole stacking armor with no hunger thing...It kind of defied Newton's law of conservation. Peering at my armor, I wondered what other secrets it held. Not having time to dwell on that, I picked up several good looking slabs of the dark metal before carrying them out of my room. I placed them onto an empty spot on the workbenches Torix set up. Sitting down, I carved runes.

I figured making something out of the plates would be both useful and calming. I started my crafting journey off with the most basic piece of armor I could make - a shield. Using my fist like a hammer, I broke off bits of the shield by slamming my fist into the edges of the plate. In minutes, Torix cast a silencing magic over me, grumbling all the while. I'll admit, I may have been as loud as a bottle of thunder bursting.

Maybe. Just maybe.

Anyways, I encapsulated myself in the calm of crafting. Like a madman, I smashed that plate over and over. Stress relieving and somewhat productive, I created a roughly triangular shape. Using my gauntleted hands, I scraped the edges of the shield, smoothing them out.

It took all I had in me to make that happen. It was enough.

**Skill unlocked! Craftsmanship(lvl 1) - You are the maker of what you imagine. +1% to ease and precision of crafting.**

The skill leveled with time, and each level bumped off a bit of difficulty for molding the metal. Putting both hands over the plate's sides, I grasped and pushed my knee into the middle. I pried it down, caving the middle portion of the plate inward. This created a nice concave shape to the shield. If I placed the back of my palm against it, the points of contact would meld together over a minute or two.

The bonds held strong enough that the result satisfied me. With the shaping of the shield handled, I decided on several sets of runes I'd use for the shield's enchantments. After a bit of brainstorming, I added in the markings for safety, peace, and calm, engraving them in the upper right portion of the shield. Looking at them reminded me of floating underwater with my eyes closed. I could just completely let go and relax. Ah.

After I made those runes, I carved the runes for stability and balance into the upper left side of the shield. Stability and balance came together in perfect harmony like listening to the gush of an ocean's waves or the rumble of heavy rain. Unfortunately, all the patches of runes lacked that same concordance. The two different meanings dampened each other's effects, making the shield dissonant and less effective.

I aimed to change that.

At the bottom of the shield, I chiseled the sigils for unity and love. A little cheesy, sure, but it got the job done. With a heavy pressing of my hand, I sliced long rivets into the shield between each set of runes. I etched a few runes on these connections, ensuring they made the runes connect. I pulsed mana through it, and golly, the thing worked. Gee willikers.

**Skill unlocked! Enchanting(lvl 1) - You give life to what you envision. +1% to the effect of enchantments.**

The skill unlocked as I completed the last rune. When I finished polishing the shield, I lifted it up and glanced at my handiwork. Rough, choppy, and jagged, the shield beamed out with an amateur shoddiness that radiated in an undeniable fashion. I grinned at the terrible piece of equipment, it being my first work. Setting it aside, my eyes kept returning to it along with a deep sense of satisfaction. Terrible or not, I made it, and it was mine.

I spent so much time in my life running around without owning anything. Even before the system arrived, I slept on a couch with only my boxing gloves to my name. They smelled awful, and the leather fell off all over the place, making a mess. This shield outdid those twenty buck gloves from Amazon. Sparking memories, I used Kelsey's account to buy those gloves. I waved off some unease, keeping myself dialed in.

For that moment, I thought about myself. And making something on my own, it documented a nice shift in my mindset. I may have owned nothing, but in time, I could amass a fortune of my own skin artifacts. I wrinkled my brow at that thought, kind of disgusted. Peering at the glossy sheen of the shield, I smiled.

Nobody would ever know. Heh. My eyes widened at an update in my status.

**Enchanted Plate of Skin | Level Requirement: 100 - This shield is a hastily made object with a few basic runes carved into it to enhance its protective qualities. While not nearly as powerful as it could be, the unknown material carries excellent qualities. Being hard as quartz but flexible as polyglass, the metal can sustain severe punishment before shattering.**

**Effects:**

**Living Metal: Takes damage in place of the user if hit. The shield may use health or mana to be repaired after taking damage. This effect can occur without the user's consent if mental strength isn't high.**

**Total Health pool remaining: 1,000/1,000 | Damage Resistance: 90% | Effective Health Added: 300**

**Mark of Balance: Reduces force of impact on shield by 50%. Doesn't reduce damage, just the effect of force on the user. When the health of the shield reaches zero, this effect is omitted.**

I raised my hands in victory, even Schema recognizing my tiny breakthrough. The shield paled in comparison to most artifacts, but it was worth using. The whole process left me refreshed and ready for more. In all honesty, I didn't even know how long I'd been sitting there. It didn't really matter to me either. In my eyes, it was time well spent, and considering the situation, what more could I ask for?

Diving right back in, the shield added little to my actual health pool or anyone's for that matter. Resolving to fix the issues, I paced back to my room and retrieved another plate from the stack of my piled up armor skin. After walking back, I froze in place. Althea worked on the same workbench

as me, and she crafted these disgusting green sacks with her hands. She frowned at one, poking it with a finger,

“Gah...These are so gross.”

I walked up, “They definitely are. What’s wrong with that?”

She laid her head in front of the fleshy, swirling packet of green, “These are super nasty, and I want them to be...I don’t know, cuter, I guess?”

I poked one with a finger knuckle. It wobbled, “Huh...What about drawing a smiley face on them?” I winced, “Kind of a morbid thought. ”

Althea raised a brow at me, “What’s a smiley face?”

I drew one into the inner part of my shield. I turned it to her, “It’s like this.”

“Ah, that can totally work.”

I lifted the shield, “Speaking of work, could you work with this?”

She turned and clamped her fingers onto the shield, “What’s it for?”

“A shield. It’s barely any extra health for me, so I figured you might be able to use it.”

I turned around and walked off before Althea smiled at it, “Woah...Thanks.”

I waved, “No problem. I might not have to take an explosion for you next time if you have that.”

“Oh haha. Very funny.”

I sat back down at the table before brainstorming for a few more minutes. Defensive gear wouldn’t do much for me since the spare metal was weaker than the armor on me. Offensive gear opened up more opportunities as a whole. I walked back into my room and carried a pile of my skin in my arms. I set it into the main room with a cacophony of clanking.

Torix kept his eyes on his charts, but he mouthed, “Keep tearing your own skin off like that, and you’ll run right through my rations.”

I leaned over the pile, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I toyed with the different pieces of metal, connecting runic inscriptions on different pieces. The unending tension of the last few weeks melted away as I did. Focusing on creation instead of destruction helped me take my mind off all the stressful aspects of my life too. It even acted as a pleasant mix up from the blood and guts that permeated my fighting.

Meandering with the plates, I found more and more limitations with the skin as it was. An evolution and a few level ups would ease the entire process. After hitting a particularly frustrating kink in the process, I let an armor piece slap the table. Leaning back, I opened my status and looked at the

time. After the crafting breaks, I straightened myself out and fully functioned. Taking a breath, I stood and turned to Althea and Torix.

I spread my hands, "I think I'm ready to head out. I want to test some of the stuff I made too."

Torix turned, one fire eye narrow and the other fire eye wide, "Are you certain?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Torix sent a message using his interface with Schema, "Then here is the route you and the others shall follow. Fight enemies here, here, and here at these select times. That shall avoid the normal routes of the Followers, and I'll update you if anything goes awry in the meantime. Considering the defensive posture they've taken, we shouldn't run into any problems."

I read through the long list of data, "Man, you're so thorough."

Torix tilted his nose up without thinking, "Oh, well it's good of you to notice. I do put in an effort to maintain my reputation."

Kessiah burst into the room through the entrance. Having heard us through the wall, Kessiah frowned,

"I thought we'd be trapped here forever. Blugh, it's time to do anything but just lay around. I'm literally bored out of my mind."

We collected all of our relevant equipment. Althea kept a bag of glowing, green grenades under her robe. She carried my crafted shield on her left arm and her usual rifle composed her right arm. If she regenerated that shield, it might be way more useful for her than I first imagined it would be. On the other hand, I carried a bag full of random trinkets I crafted in the meantime. Kessiah kept nothing on hand, needing nothing besides her enormous number of levels.

We all walked out, Althea and Kessiah popping up with their steps. Mine were heavy but prepared. I understood what I walked into, and a piece of dreaded it. Kessiah walked out with an obelisk in her hand, guiding us out towards Springfield. She skipped a bit between each step, brimming with growing, bubbly excitement. When we reached outside the suburbs, Kessiah turned to us, "You guys ready for a little bit of blood?"

Althea nodded, "Uhm, we have to be, right?"

My nerves raced at thoughts of the deformed monsters. I peered forward with an unblinking gaze, "We do."

Kessiah raised a brow, "You scared, tough guy?"

I stopped my hands from shaking as I gazed at her, "Yeah. I am."

Kessiah smirked, "Huh. I expected more out of you."



I furrowed my brow, grimacing towards my hometown, "Anyone can be brave without fear. Few can show courage in the face of it."

Kessiah raised her hands, "Wow, you got catch phrases now, huh?"

I ignored her, mentally preparing myself for what was to come. Disappointed I didn't take the bait, Kessiah tsked before bursting into a sprint. We bolted behind her, keeping up. Kessiah shouted over the wind in our ears,

"I'm going to keep pretty close to you two, but it'll be up to the both of you to handle these *monsters* on your own."

Althea and I nodded. Kessiah pointed at herself, "Make sure you don't overextend yourself, and maybe try to work together. Your skills mesh well, so don't let that go to waste."

We sprinted through the fields and forests on our way towards Springfield. The whole trip drenched us in an unnerving calm. A cold sweat formed over my forehead, my nerves making me all jittery. Even though my mind accepted all that I had seen when I first entered the quarantine zone, anxiety riddled my chest and hands. As time passed, I gained a better understanding of where my adrenaline came from.

It wasn't fear. It was incitement. I wanted to rip and tear.

Glad that at least some part of me looked forward to this, we reached the edges of the suburbs where the steel legion's blockade lined the infected areas. More deformed bodies piled in the distance, holes from bullets littering their torsos and skulls. Less panicky than when I first arrived at the barricade, more details popped out to me.

Across every suburban block, the Force of Iron guarded a generator. Two circular pieces of metal spiralled around a blue core that shot out arcs of lightning at regular intervals. Runic markings covered those generators, and antennas stuck out the top of them. These streaks of blue electricity dispersed out into a field that contained the petal bugs. It strengthened the higher up I looked, the field eventually becoming brittle near the ground.

It stopped the spread of the infectors but not the infected. The ground troops handled that part. They relied much more on killing the creatures from a distance than locking them in. So far, it worked well enough. Trucks drove down the road and unloaded shipments of ammo at supply points. Those revamped factories near the warehouse district handled the production, supplying the whole operation. That's why they put themselves in the industrial area to begin with. It was a smart move.

Walking up to the well supplied soldiers, I wished they lacked the foresight for that base. Their abundant resources made piercing the barricade much harder. That being said, Kessiah dwarfed their levels to the point of muting their strengths entirely. With her hands in her pockets, she strode up to the base. She smiled at them, oozing confidence, composure, and dominance. She announced,

"Hello boys and girls. I hope you don't mind us walking into the quarantine zone. Otherwise, I'm going to have to force my way in. You don't want me to force my way in." Kessiah raised her eyebrows, "Unless you want to play for a while."

The soldiers glanced at one another, confusion spreading through their ranks. My blood ran cold because I understood the context behind Kessiah's words. Her threats were like throwing a live grenade at a child with the pin pulled. Everyone here flopped about, unaware of what they held in their hands. The soldier's commanding officer replied with a loudspeaker and spoke back,

"Schema has now ordered us to let anyone enter the zone if they want to. We are not responsible for saving you. Good hunting."

The commanding officer walked out, a woman covered in metal armor. She waved her hand, signalling Althea and I to follow. I grimaced at how easily Kessiah got in. After all the work I put in, I could've just walked in whenever. Kessiah leaned over to me and murmured,

"Don't look so down. They would've tried killing you for the experience. Your level was low, after all."

A bad taste spawned in my mouth before Kessiah gave me a pat on the back. She whispered, "That's what being an unknown is all about - knives in the back and shots to the face. Breathe it in, young buck. You might as well get used to it."

It wouldn't take much longer before the soldier's posed no threat to me, so the unknown status wouldn't matter thereafter. Casually being threatened still rubbed me the wrong way all the same. Staring at Kessiah's back, it made me wonder how many times she suffered from that kind of experience. It must've been countless occasions. Given her being a remnant, Kessiah never lived a life without being hunted.

I couldn't even imagine what that must be like.

The culmination of those experiences explained Kessiah's relentless cynicism. She lived in a world that bit her from all sides. She learned early on to bite back. I happened to be a convenient person to attack or something along those lines because Kessiah didn't give Althea a hard time like she did me. I wondered where the animosity stemmed from, but all I could do was hope for answers in time.

Passing the barricade, haunting howls leaked in from all directions. I centered myself back in the moment. We walked across the barricaded entrance before a girl guard walked out in front of us. She pointed her rifle at some of the infected in the distance,

"Hey. Aim for the cores, don't let them touch you, and try to stay moving. They can overwhelm you if you let them collect into a swarm. Bullets don't work unless you hit the cores, and fire can hold them down for a while. They're tougher than they look, so be mindful."

Kessiah patted her shoulder, "Thanks honey. We'll keep it in mind."

The guard coughed into a hand, "I-I know you probably don't need the tips, but I've seen quite a few people go in there and die already. I figured it might help."

Kessiah tapped where the guard's nose would be if not for her helmet. Kessiah chimed, "You're cute. You know that?"

The female guard trotted off, her embarrassment leaking out even through her metal armor. We walked by before reaching the first line of houses. Fresh blood and bloody flesh scattered everywhere. Monsters roamed. Fires burned. My hands trembled, but my armor roared out in my mind. It wanted food, and it would have it.

I lowered my gaze, mana channeling into my runes. I intended on being awake this time. From my channeling last night, I learned my own mana could overwhelm me if I let it. To stop that, I put a chain on my usage this time, keeping it tidy and maintained. Kessiah turned to me before tilting her head,

"Hm, normally I'd say using mana like that might expose us, but there are quite a few people fighting in the quarantine zone. People from other planets will be coming to help with the quest as well...If we're lucky. News will have to leak out first, but after that, we'll be in a good situation. They'll have some insane energy signatures, so we won't stick out after that."

I ramped up the energy into my runes, charging them with the orange energy and coarse lightning. Strength flowed into my limbs before I clamped my fists. I smashed my fists together, "I'll lead the way."

Kessiah scoffed, "Go for it little man. I'm sure it'll be fun."

I bent down, "Alright. Keep your distance. I'll be using an aura, and it'll damage the both of you."

Althea raised her palms, "So, like, I had no plans on going out there anyways. I'm taking out who I can with potshots for a while. You go take 'em out, chief. I'll, uhm, sit back and watch."

After giving her a curt nod, I sprinted forward. Once I reached about a block ahead of them, I ramped up Oppression. It molded at my thoughts, a part of my being. I shifted the aura a little, trying to keep it from stretching its full distance. It dipped down to where I could see, putting a lot of pressure off me. The last thing I wanted was to kill someone struggling to survive out here. Piercing deeper into the town, I figured out that dealing with survivors wasn't going to be a problem.

We stayed on Torix's route, avoiding fights while heading to the points of combat the necromancer mentioned. After a few rows of houses, mushrooms and other fungi rooted in the ground. Colored a sickly yellow, the funguses looked like collections of bodies molded together and reformed into plantlife. These biological horrors expanded and swelled as we explored deeper into Springfield.

I gawked in horror as familiar landmarks eroded into mere shadows of their former glory. We passed neighborhoods I remembered from a longtime ago, having passed them on my school bus. Deformed abominations took the place of humans there, the shambling monstrosities overtaking any semblance of humanity. Everyone already died in these residential areas, most of them murdered in violent waves of the newly infested.

The haunting sights didn't end there. They rained in one after the other. We passed my old elementary school, the building converting into a dungeon since the last time I saw it. Yawm's wildlife

smothered the area, and a few escaped dungeon monsters duked it out with the encroaching fungal beasts. Blood took the place of chattering children. Splattering corpses replaced the sound of closing lockers. Congealing meat replaced the smells of pencils and erasers.

In the courtyard of the school, backpacks circled hopscotch circles and a pile of jump ropes. When the system arrived, children played in the middle of some activity. The monsters ripped a few of the backpacks and knocked over some of those supplies, ripping it all apart. We left the bloody battle after I soaked in a few of the monster's corpses. It had to be done.

Those dilapidated places hurt to see, but the worst sight, by far, was my old boxing gym. Outlast crumbled into a shadow of its previous self, the entire building torn to shreds. Windows broke. Dust settled. Several fungi grew from the walls, and a large human moss pushed the gym's sign aside. It was like the encroaching ecosystem was dismantling my old memories of this place, replacing them with the horrors of Yawm.

Because I asked, we walked into the gym for a while, but no living person lingered here. As we left, I kept my memories of that place close to my chest. Like everything else here, this place turned into a memory. I aimed to keep it fresh and close to home, not let it be turned into this decayed corpse of a place.

Other places left their marks on me, but we kept moving. At first, seeing the decay left me hollowed out like some gutted animal. This infestation destroyed my home. It was like my entire life scrubbed clean, no person, place, or thing lingering from my past. It gave me a feeling of loneliness as we skulked through those abandoned streets, torn houses, and old homes. In time, the desolation spawned something else in me.

A dark, embittering fury.

Yawm would pay for what he did here. He'd pay for what he did to my friends, my home, even my memories of this place. I'd tear his face off and make him wear the dried skin. Peering at my status, I stood no chance of even slowing a follower down, let alone Yawm. Unlike everyone in Springfield, I still lived, so I could change. I'd break down who I was and turn myself into something indomitable. If I needed to, I'd become a monster to kill one.

And that would be easy here where monsters roamed in abundance. Black veins traced the stems and stalks of every shrub, lichen, or tree. Thanks to Oppression, the plants wilted in two minutes while we passed by. We carved out a slice of the growing ecosystem, forging a path here. More of the plants came together in the deeper sections of the city, the roots connecting into dense foliage. No longer did the plants pile up like bodies. Instead, they conjoined up into trees without leaves, some with buds on them.

Once we pierced deep enough, pods covered those trees. Inside them, monstrosities formed. They peered at us with beady eyes through the thin, translucent covers insulating them. Once I reached close enough that a pod got in range of Oppression, a pod's eyes locked in on us. The beasts swelled and pulsed from within their pods. One of the monsters popped out. A wet slush of material landed on the ground before a pair of eyes glanced up at us.

It was perfect, because Torix sent us to handle our first batch of enemies here. Gawking at the beast, I bore holes through it with my eyes, my armor grinning but my own lips forming a scowl. Kessiah meant safety wasn't a concern, and gaining experience took priority. Mana rippled across my skin as I narrowed my eyes.

I'd avenge my home and the people who died here. I'd gore these monsters to pulp. It was time for battle. It was time for war.