

39 Infestation

Ready for anything, I slowed my pace to a crawl. Plastic covered several buildings. People wore hazmat suits. They spoke with radio intercoms, sterilizing agents being sprayed everywhere. For some reason, they quarantined the area. If my guess was right, that's why the Force of Iron captured Michael and Kelsey to begin with. Before moving on, I opened my status, giving the others a quick update.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Everyone, they're quarantining people near Springfield. It looks serious, and Michael and Kelsey might be contaminated. Just a heads up, and I'll let you all know if I find something else worth noting.

Pacing forward, screams echoed from inside buildings, muffled behind plastic linings. Gurgling oozed, a sickening splattering and sloshing ebbing out as well. I squirmed at the cacophony of the marks droning in. Several vehicles rolled in from ahead of me along an open road. The jeeps mounted flamethrowers with barrels still glowing from use.

Congeaed blood and yellow goo coated the fronts and sides of those vehicles. Something monstrous lingered in the mist. Staring at the quarantine line, I could either continue on or turn back. Pressing on meant going through this mess. Going back meant fighting my way through the entire Force of Iron's camp. I'd fight either way, but these monsters meant I might get some levels and experience.

Making a quick decision off that logic, I pressed forward aiming to skulk by everything. I'd pay for that decision.

After getting into the city, I aimed to get distance and escape later. Peering at the blockade from behind gates and trees, they lacked any real gaps in the whole area. Anytime anything approached, the soldiers turned around and fired. Jumpy as scared cats, the gunners laid it on thick too, each of them generous with their ammo. Taking my time to avoid their fire, I found a gap between two houses where no guards stood.

I bolted across a fence, beelining through the gap. Soldiers on the other side of the house found me sprinting away. They unloaded clips at my back. Hitting me like molten knives, lead dug into me again. Getting through the bombardment, I thanked whoever gave them normal rifles instead of plasma ones. I kept charging forward until I reached some pavement, and other soldiers closed in from the barricade's sides.

The troopers let loose, barraging my general vicinity with a storm of lead. I jumped up before landing dead center on the old road. Stomping my heels, the cracked asphalt caved in. Chunks

of pavement and dirt rose up around me, high as my knees. Stabbing my fingers into the largest pad of rock, I pulled up the chunk and wielded the piece of road as a shield.

Dozens of bullets lodged into the earth and pavement as I trotted away, crouching behind my barrier. After a while, I slammed the pavement into the ground. Turning around, I dashed away. The fog cloaked me as bullets clipped into nearby homes. I kept running until I disappeared into a sea of mist, homes, and screams. After hurdling over several fences, I huddled between two closely knit houses.

I leaned my back against a wall, catching my breath. I had time to think, and I didn't squander the blessing. This outbreak looked like a rift that got out of control or something similar, as if a hivemind or something escaped a dungeon. At least it explained how the Force of Iron enlisted so many people. As citizens died here, the survivors united against their common killer.

While looking at my surroundings, that outright slaughter took front and center. Fresh blood stains lingered but no full bodies remained, only pieces here or there. Not being squeamish, I kept my mind whole and sane. Further adding to the mental pressure, howls of agony echoed in from all directions. They fused into a steady drone like I visited a circle of hell. Gunfire flared. Windows collapsed. People gurgled on blood, their own and from other sources.

Car tires squealed. Flames burned. Ash settled.

In the midst of it all, I wheezed for air, exhausted from running for miles but mainly from getting shot at. Either that or I hyperventilated from panic. I couldn't tell anymore. Lead pieces clattered onto the grass beneath me, and I peered around. The source of the sounds and burning seeped in. They sank under my skin and into my mind. The townsfolk fueled a slaughter, an onslaught, a massacre, all of it molding together to form a dying city.

Blood splashed the inside of car windows. Blood spread across patches of pavement. Blood dried onto grass. The doors and fences. Blood. Even the bird fountains flowed with red. A sanguine aura soaked in from all angles, and it permeated the ground here. It suffused the air, a mist of iron and acrid bloat lingering. I never believed in superstitions or the rising of the dead.

This place changed my mind.

Where blood flowed, bodies followed. And the bodies piled by the dozen in the distance. Coming into focus, the corpses piled by the hundreds. Children, women, the elderly, nothing survived here. Bodies ruptured, torn in half and draped over wooden walls. Nothing left in my stomach, a wave of nausea poured over me as people's intestines swung in the wind. Dead eyes peered out from the corpses, empty as bottomless wells.

Many of those hollowed eyes peered in different directions. Limbs dotted the landscape. The sights pulled me into a surreal, hellish place. I gawked beside a car, freshly flayed fingernails

missing off from a severed hand. Doors snapped apart in doorways, animals or beasts having pried them open. Peering at the horror, it all sank in.

This was hell. I was in hell.

I stood up, my knees quivering. I blinked, pins and needles tracing up my arms. I glanced into a nearby house. A man in black armor stared back at me. Scared out of my right mind, I put myself into a fighting stance. The person mirrored my movements. I leaned back, my hands dropping with a wave of relief.

I stared at a mirror.

Some metal lodged itself into my armor. I looked like I'd walked straight through an army and come out the other side, which, yeah, I essentially had. I sighed while pulling out a jagged blade from one of the blade mines. Over the next few minutes, I tore out bullets, bits of metal from the helicopter, and the blades from the grenades in the warehouses. As I finished pulling out the last unwanted decoration, I thought for a moment.

The blockade kept all of this inside. Torix warned me about what may happen here, yet I never imagined anything like this. However, there was one entity capable of this utter destruction - Yawm of Flesh. I dragged my hands down my face, mental exhaustion smothering me from all sides. I could wait here and die, or I could push forward and live.

My decision already made, I stood up and walked around the block, discovering horrors around every corner. Mauled to bits, the bodies carried bits of teeth, claws, blades, and puncture marks across every inch of their surface. I couldn't imagine what butchered everyone. Staring at a pulped face, I thanked it for being unrecognizable. If I found someone I knew, I might've collapsed onto the ground.

At this point, I calmed down enough that rational thoughts swam through my head. I needed a way back to Torix and company. I rolled my shoulders, and I whispered,

"Torix...Er, shade of Torix. Are you there?"

Nothing answered. I frowned, sending out a message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - They've butchered everyone in town. I'll let you guys know if I need help, but everything seems fine for now. As fine as a massacre can be.

Torix shot back a reply.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - My warping isn't long range, and doing it many times in a row will leave me weakened. My shade is caught currently, and Althea is

returning here with your friends. Wait a day or two there, and I shall be there promptly. It seems as though something is amiss, and I believe I've missed it because of this ritual.

I pray that it isn't too late to change the outcome of whatever is happening there. Good luck, disciple.

Torix's logic resonated with me. The Force of Iron's search would die down after a few hours, and I could take advantage of that. The best plan involved sitting here, waiting a day or two before charging through another part of the blockade. As I waited, I sent a message towards Torix that mentioned the steel legion's blockade, Yawm's effect on Springfield, and me being fine.

It was redundant, but my nerves spiked by then. I took a breather, waiting an hour. I let my mind just wander aimlessly, my eyes glazing over. The eerie screaming staved off any attempts at sleep, and the unsettling bodies also haunted me. I numbed to it all in time, and that hour gave me back my mental sharpness. At least what little I owned in the first place.

Snapping me out of my trance, something moved in a house several blocks down. I ignored it, set on waiting out whatever infested this place. Situated between two homes, a pod of pink fluttered in front of my eyes. My eyes followed it as the tiny, pink petal drifted in the wind. A black pod swelled at the end of it, and it reminded me of a cherry blossom.

It flipped in the wind before landing on the ground. Another tossed through the wind and landed on the road. They kept pouring down, more and more falling from the sky. They danced in the wind, and they floated like hummingbirds at times. I stood and gawked, awash in their haunting beauty. They mesmerized me, a piece of majesty amidst all the murder.

One petal landed on the body of a middle aged man. The black pod split open, revealing a tiny insect made of squirming legs and writhing teeth. It wriggled into the body before drilling into the open corpse of the man. Within seconds, black veins spread from underneath his skin. Seconds later, the corpse twitched. First one finger. Then an arm. Then the eyes.

More like a flesh puppet than a man, the body contorted and writhed before claws of bone grew from its fingertips. The cheeks of the man sunk inward before they split open, revealing the human teeth underneath. Fear crept up my spine as several tubes grew from the back of the man, before swelling to their brim with blood. They burst. The open squelch of tearing meat lashed out, revealing several eyes. Hollow eyes. Hungry eyes.

They glanced around, the limbs of the man bending backwards so that the creature could move. My breathing dampened, turning shallow as the beast turned towards me. The thing twitched before Schema recognized it.

Spawn of Yawm | Level 200 - This is one of Yawm's new pawns. He and his entourage clear out entire populations before assimilating them into his army of mutants. This is the youngest and weakest variation you will see with Yawm's name on it. If enough of these

collect together, enormous, writhing balls of moving limbs will come together into something known as grikes.

The best method of preventing this is burning the bodies of the dead before Yawm can wield them. This isn't always possible. The faster you can kill these monstrosities, the better since they rapidly evolve into more powerful variations and eventually gain sentience.

Even though this message tells you all this, little is understood about the potential of these enemies. Be wary, and most of all, be afraid.

I frowned before gritting my teeth. It would find me, along with many others. If a petal could infect a single person, then this entire place would be swarming in minutes. Killing this thing before others reformed was my only chance. If I killed it, leveled up, used the gained points, then I could fight my way out of here. Having no more time for a more developed plan, I charged at it while crushing my own fears.

The back of the man split open, revealing three tentacles, each with a blade at the end of them. As I reached the thing, one of the blades whipped towards me with enough force to cleave through steel. I moved my right arm and molded my armor, redirecting the tentacle straight into the ground. Another shot towards me before I opened my mouth and bit towards the thing.

My armor's maw followed, the metal rending open and cleaving through the metallic blade at the end of the tentacle. I jerked my neck, tearing the limb from the creature before stomping onto the blade that missed me. My foot crunched the dagger underfoot before the third tentacle snapped my way. I banged the tentacle away with a quick snap of my left forearm, forcing it to swing sideways.

The tentacle redirected towards my side, but I charged forward. The tentacle scraped my back, gashing me open like a filleted fish, but I encroached on the monster. I pivoted my hips, launching a hook towards the center of its black, veiny mass. The flesh of the dead man popped and split, softer than butter. The dark veins stopped the might of my fist, each black tube tough as wood.

I damaged the host of the monster, but it regenerated in a few seconds. No longer worried about killing normal people, I activated Oppression. The creature squealed out in an unearthly, monstrous bellow. It wrapped its tentacle around my waist, lifting me into the air. The tendril quivered from my weight, my body heavier than it expected. I raised a foot back and kicked it. The monster stumbled back, releasing me.

I tackled forward, pushing the tube of meat before lifting a foot. I stomped at its chest, hitting the creature like I kicked a door down. It flopped backward before I pressed a heel onto a wriggling tentacle. My planted foot kept it from fumbling backward. From the middle of my palm, I formed

a dull, jagged spike. As if I swung a sword, I sliced the spike towards the tentacle. Tight and frail, the limb ruptured.

Black blood gushed from the limb, the tentacle whipping through the air like a sputtering hose of umbral fluid. The black ooze splattered onto my armor before I charged forward again. I raised both my arms overhead before pulling them down with all my strength. The blackening body squished under the impact. My shoulders strained at the force, but I held together. Before it recovered, I pummeled the body of the man to mush.

It lived through carnage, its body held together by a vitality unending and absolute. It reformed over and over, a regenerative ball of filth. The blood soaked into my skin, and my armor devoured it before the liquid infested me. It tried sliding into my mouth, but my metal maw ingested the beast's fragments. This virulent ball of death crumbled into paste. One strike after the other, my hands turned into meat grinders. The man's deformed body turned into red and black oatmeal with bits of bone in it. I ceased defending myself, other bodies changing around me.

I burned through most of my health, turning my own body into fuel for my augmentation runes. Other bodies morphed near me while this monstrosity stayed alive. My clawing and strikes devolved into desperate haymakers. I stomped. I crushed. I crumbled. It had to die, or its brethren would devour me.

Dozens of corpses squirmed, each of them shivering violently as black veins grew underneath their pale skin. The surreal scene surrounded me, becoming a living nightmare. In the middle of that blood soaked suburb, a graceful shower of pink petals landed like a cherry blossoming festival in Japan. As the petals condensed, the number of corpses thinned and the number of shambling abominations thickened.

They closed in as the one below me stopped moving. In a panic, I opened my status. It died, giving me experience and levels. I poured my points into endurance, and I finalized my decision without time for anything else. In an instant, the dense, heavy coat of exhaustion over me wilted. I heaved a few breaths before charging into the nearest mockery of a human body.

Fear fueled me, and I wouldn't go down without a fight. Getting near the monster, I stalled for a second. The body of a child folded backwards, walking with its stomach bulging towards the sky. I took a step back, and something in the back of my mind roared. Bloodlust. Savagery. Brutality. It consumed me. It reached out, crawling into my mind. Having no other choice, I embraced the calling like an old friend.

Now was not the time for patience or calm or peace. It was time for bloodletting. For hatred. For murder. For hunger.

I roared, my cry primal, my anger bleating. I tore towards the corpse of a child, and as I reached it, the stomach bursted in a cloud of red mist. Two arms with hands made out of its ribcage

swung towards me. My sympathy died as I let those hands crash straight into my shoulders. Like a monster, I shot my hand into the spawn's chest. I gouged out its organs. I tore out its entrails.

I grabbed the densest cluster of black veins and ripped it out. The skin stretched and swelled and split. I pulled out one of the writhing bugs. The petals split to two wings, each of them spread out as thin films of muscle. They latched into the child's body while the numerous black legs of the bug had grown into the black limbs of the creature. The abdomen of the insect turned into a heart, beating the black blood throughout the corpse.

Its muscle wings snapped onto my hand, and it crawled at me. I ripped the abomination onto the ground before heel stomping it into oblivion. It cracked like a hollow ball of wood under my heel, odd and unnatural for what it was. The crunchy remnants stuck to my foot, furthering its infection. It crawled at my foot, trying to dig under my skin. It met my armor, and I crawled back into it.

It died, and more levels rushed in. No time for thoughtful decisions, I poured more points into endurance and finalized. The decapitated corpse of a woman shambled at me. She walked on the road before having her head sliced clean off. Bark scales grew out of her skin, forming plates of armor as her chest split open into a gaping mouth with spiked teeth. The cheekless mouth growled, the maw like a crocodile-human hybrid.

Reacting as it charged, I stomped the mouth into the ground, breaking the new jaw of the abomination off. One of the arms whipped towards me, the arm's bone hitting my shoulder. I stayed together, but the monster's arm didn't. It snapped, the dull crack muffled by the muscle and skin. The bark scales sliced out at me. They dug into my armor before I slung my fist at it. The creature's gut popped into the ground.

The woman's spine snapped, caving the monster in. The upper and lower body of the woman squirmed like a cockroach pinched in the middle. I stomped the monster into the ground before grabbing its leg. I howled as I pulled with my limbs screaming in effort. My endurance fueled my runes, giving me strength and power. Wielding my blood as a weapon, I tore muscle from bone and bone from body.

The leg gored out, the other parts of it scrambling for escape. Every part clambered in a different direction as if every piece of it lived. I restrained the beast. I growled, using the bone of its leg as a spear. I stabbed, piercing the black bug with the femur of the woman. Lifting it up, and my helmet devoured the squirming insect. My armor laughed. In hell, I was driven mad, but my armor gave my madness a purpose.

An eternal hunger. A relentless starvation. An endless famine.

I leaned over, glancing around like an animal. I found two bodies mushing together into a mass of meat. I bolted towards the aberration, crushing numerous bones before forcing it onto the

ground. As I pulled myself upward, the skin of the creature latched onto me. Like a malignant infection, it filled into the cracks of my armor. It found no food, only a hunter. My armor collapsed onto the creature, my own flesh and blood giving me an airtight seal.

But this monster lacked my defenses, and I abused it beneath me. Jerking my arms off the beast, the skin of the creature split with sickening pops. Torrents of red and black blood pumped from the creature before I smashed it into pieces. I smashed pieces to pulp. I smashed pulp to liquid. From my feet, wires of my armor reached out and soaked the beast in.

I turned, finding the head of the decapitated woman chewing on one of the leftover bodies I left behind. It grew a pair of six pus covered legs. I grimaced as veins grew from the mother's mouth and pumped the meat of the body into its head. As it did so, the skull ballooned outwards until the scalp and cheeks of the mother split. The pumping ebbed a nauseating squelch.

Everywhere around me, the bodies wretched and contorted and warped into disgusting aberrations of organs and skin. Some were collections of hands and jaws and teeth. Others devolved into winged thralls with their intestines hanging like a jellyfish's tentacles. Some of the bodies grew into the ground, holes appearing in the skin of the person before the pink petal puffed out of them.

Worse still, other corpses swelled in the bodies before slugs covered in sacks crawled out of their skin. As they neared the quarantine line, bullets rained in. Fire plumed and the slugs hissed in agony. They crawled into an electric fence, vaporizing to ash. It was madness. Everything was madness.

In that insanity, I went insane as well.

A darkness in the back of my mind unleashed, its fury endless and its hunger perpetual. This was my reality. This was my home. Who I was would die here. Who I'd become would survive. I surged the will to battle. I wallowed in the sanguine sensation, my hands shaking in my fervor. I dashed into another monster, ready for war. I stomped and struck like lightning. I roared and raged like thunder.

I let loose all inhibitions, turning into an animal. Everything blurred as instinct took over. Blood became my paint and Springfield my canvas. I tore into the living corpses like a butcher chopping into its meat with a cleaver. Blood splattered across my skin, sinking into my armor and boots and gloves. It sunk into me. Anytime reasoning returned, I put points into endurance and let myself go once more.

I chomped into the monsters, devouring them. My armor savoured the flavor of their flesh, sweet as sugar and enticing as water in a desert. I lost all understanding as my fingers became claws, and my mouth curved up into a smile. A haunting laugh droned in my head. A long, maddening snicker that bore into my skull like a tungsten tipped drill. It engulfed my mind with its steady, monotonous rhythm.

It grew in volume, becoming a symphony in the blood and black and horror. The sound didn't fight the sounds of guts slapping the ground or bones breaking. It harmonized with the horror, echoing the dread and the trembling of my hands. It was a coming tide, an unstoppable stampede, a boundless, dark abyss. An endless tide, a writhing mass. It poured over me, becoming my battlecry. In time, I feared that haunting laughter more than the horror's howling.

For the laughter was me.

And somewhere deep within, its voice resonated with me. Something robbed me of my humanity, a seed sprouting in my chest. That hysteria and lunacy carried me through the brutality of the situation. Hours passed, each second an eternity. I gained control of myself, flashing back to reality. I stared down, finding my hand holding a skull by the eye sockets. My other hand clasped into a wet, dripping fist, suffused with blood.

I leaned over a pile of corpses. Bodies splayed out in every direction. Horns, teeth, spikes, claws, and plates impaled my armor across several parts of me. My armor pulled back together, sheets of it ripped and gored apart. Chunks of my skin tore off. My armor smiled, gorging on the horrors around me. I gorged on the bodies with the maw of my helmet like some cannibal.

I fell backwards, landing in the bodies. My armor reached down into them, and I held down vomit at my surroundings. My armor fought me to continue feasting, but I crushed the greed with my will. I scrambled back, my head plopping back onto the pavement after I left the bodies behind. I stared at the clear, open sky. The fog dispersed, and the sun pelted me.

Petals ceased falling, many lying around me. A few of them crawled towards the heap of carcasses at the center of the road near me. As I stared at the heap of bloody bodies, a force in the back of my mind hungered. My eyes widened, and I leaned back. My armor's urges compelled me, not myself. It being a part of me now, I held responsibility for what I did with its desires.

I slammed a fist into the pavement. I wouldn't forget that.

Peering at the fuschia leaves, they crawled towards the pile of pulped bodies and reformed it in seconds. The pink petal bugs kept using the biomass at will, no amount of grinding or mushing enough to stop them. Gazing at my skin, I grimaced at the source of my survival. My armor indulged on the corpses of the creatures after I killed them. Otherwise, the petals reanimated the corpses and flesh into more abominations.

Eating the petals or even the corpses kept me alive until now. Sighing at that reality, I stood up on strong legs, no longer wobbling from fear. I paced up to the pile of eviscerated corpses. Just the thought of eating while near one, let alone eating the actual body disgusted me. In order to live, I did what I had to do, however.

I walked over and ripped the petal bug from the corpse pile, preventing it from reanimating the host. I crushed the creature in my hand before leaning over. I looked away and placed a hand

on the pile. My armor did the rest. I peered at the pavement as the bodies drained, screams echoed, and petals crawled. I leaned my head into my palm. I laughed for a moment before my throat burned a little. My eyes followed, and I blinked out a tear.

Other tears followed, and surrounded by evil, I wept. No one alive heard me, but I shook and trembled at what just happened. In time, a cold numbness replaced my grief. It encompassed me, and I welcomed it. It had been a long day, and my capacity for emotion already peaked. Peering around, I pulled my body along, every piece of me wanting rest.

I killed bug after bug, their level much lower than a transformed being. I let my armor feast on the monster's bodies, the pale imitations of humanity torturous and excruciating to look at. My eyes grew heavy, and I checked out my levels. I gained fifty five of them over the whole bloodbath, and I amassed five million ambient mana. I killed most of the monsters before they fully transformed, and that lowered the experience I gained.

At the same time, even being able to kill them amazed me. I piled skill on top of skill, but my unique abilities kept me alive here. In a normal circumstance, the beasts would've just infected me instantly. Getting rid of the bodies required specialized equipment as well, bullets not really working. That fact explained the flamethrowers used by the Force of Iron.

Based on the number of bodies left out here, that faction killed only a few of the monsters. Most of the abominations stayed within this wasteland, probably slaughtering people elsewhere to fuel more biomass. My armor's absorption combined with my innate resistance to the infection sustained me here.

In other words, I was lucky.

Closing my eyes, I never wanted to be in a chaotic situation again. I lost control in more ways than one here, so I tried taking that control back. Moving to my status, I glanced at my perks and tree bonuses for the first time in a long while. I invested most of my stats into endurance, but a few extra attributes lined up for me. I tried reasoning with a dulled mind.

Endurance acted as a bread and butter stat with my runes. The health and regen fed my sigils, converting into physical might. Being tireless held its own advantages as well, the fight being a great example. Endurance even augmented my willpower, another useful stat, and the health gained synergized with my armor bonuses. Keeping things simple, I invested in endurance until it peaked at 201, a nice, clean whole number.

In my status, thirteen points stared back at me. Torix mentioned level one hundred perks, and so I aimed for them afterward. Not having much mental capacity at that point, I figured strength would be the next best perk for me. I placed the points, and my perk menu popped up. The bonuses blew me away.

[Unbroken(Endurance of 100 or more plus Unstoppable and Unbounded unlocked | Note - Only three level 100 perks may be chosen for three different attributes, so choose

wisely.) - You are time's unending march, unbroken and unending. You are a testament to the will of sentients everywhere and to the might of longevity. While others collapse where you walk, you stand tall over their bodies. You stand alone.

Lifespan multiplier doubled once more. Yet another 1/10th of endurance added to willpower. Another 5 health and stamina awarded per point in endurance. | 20 in total, excluding multipliers | Leveling bonuses for endurance doubled. You no longer require any sleep.]

[Paragon of Will(Willpower of 100 or more plus Uncompromising and Arbiter unlocked | Note - Only three level 100 perks may be chosen for three different attributes, so choose wisely.) - Most live their lives with their potential unfounded. You've walked those limits time and time again. In your journey, you learned that limits are what you make of them, not what you think them to be.

Doubles internal motivation once more. Yet another 1/10th of willpower is added to intelligence. An additional .1 mana regen rewarded per point of willpower - Blood Magic converts mana regen to health regen. Doubles the leveling bonuses gained from willpower. Doubles current affinities for magic. Increases mythical skill cap by 1 | 2 total.]

Endurance acted as my staple attribute by a wide margin, so choosing it required little thought. Willpower, on the other hand, muddied otherwise clear waters. The bonuses from willpower matched up pretty well with my skills so far, but by selecting it, I cut out either strength or constitution as leveling perks.

No matter which of those attributes I sacrificed, the other attribute left a void behind. At the same time, other, less logical factors weighed on me. Peering down, my mental fatigue drenched me in a deep ocean. It piled as a pressure over every part of my being, a cloak that robbed me of my humanity. I never wanted my humanity torn from me again.

Staring around, monsters still roamed the bloody streets. Others would come, and I enjoyed no time for rest. Worse still, a part of me feared what my armor wanted. It overwhelmed me and my reason in the battle. In a crazy situation where I truly needed my full faculties, I ended up blacking out. If I did that while surrounded by normal people, what would I wake up to?

Or worse still, would I ever wake up again?

Those questions eased my decision, and I finalized the willpower perk. Whatever bonus either constitution or strength offered, my armor already gave something similar with its damage resistance. Hell, my armor was probably better than the constitution perk. My goal centered on not letting my armor overwhelm my mind. That prerogative required my full and immediate attention.

I finalized the perks and attributes, and in a crisp, clear, and cleansing wave, clarity rushed over me. It coursed into me like a palpable release of exhaustion. I blinked through new eyes, as if

waking from an amazing night of sleep. No, from many nights of sleep. Hell, *years* even. I hadn't realized it, but I debilitated myself in these fights. My mind dragged on through a fundamental fatigue that I just dealt with.

The moment I finalized the perks, that exhaustion vaporized in an instant. The refreshment gave me a different view of the situation. Instead of being overwhelmed by horror, I found opportunity in each of these minions. I should've been curled in a corner, crying my eyes out. The system let me rise above it all.

In a way, I stood in the eye of a hurricane, the storm disintegrating my surroundings while leaving me unaffected. Lifting my hands, I channeled some augmentation, enough to feel it. It responded with fury, a nice rush to accompany my lucid self. Wanting to ramp it up, I turned and peered around. The situation spiraled out of control in the distance. Getting out of here took priority over messing around, so I silenced the desire to take out the other monsters.

With a quick whip, I sank my temptation like a rock out in the ocean. After appreciating my changes, I opened my status screen for the first time in several weeks. The Obliterator tree and other tree bonuses added up rather nicely to say the least.

Level 160 | Attribute Menu

Strength [44.2] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [201] | Dexterity [32.8] | Willpower [105.5] | Intelligence [55.5] | Charisma [36] | Luck [35.1] | Perception [30.5]

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health - 7,838/7,838 | Health Regen - 1,293/min | Stamina - 1,720/1,720 | Stamina Regeneration - 63/sec | Damage Resistance - 97% | Mental Resistance - 97% | Physical Power - (+)481% | Damage Increase - 5% | Evolution: 5.95 Million/16.00 Million

Aura - Oppression | Current Damage: (8,000 + 25% of your health)/minute within a 150ft radius.

I doubled my health in one go - literally doubled it. My health regen followed suit, which acted as mana too thanks to Blood Magic. I clasped my hands, eager to test my limits, but I remembered my situation. Wielding my fresh levels, I headed towards the barricade. I walked into one of the houses near the road. I sat beside the back window of the kitchen, readying a plan of approach.

Before I got out, the ground rumbled in front of the house. I crept through the home, quiet as I could. Near the front door, I peered through a window. Standing on a destroyed portion of the street, a robed figure walked with calm, composed steps. Each time one of his feet landed on the pavement, the ground quaked. In each boot, he carried an entire stampede. From his back, wings sprouted from his back, one dark and one bright.

The wing of light poured a sun's touch across his vicinity. The umbral wind siphoned the light from around him, casting an eerie shade on his other side. As the feathered limbs widened, they dwarfed his robed body. He flapped them, and a gentle breeze flowed through every nearby home. In the wing's wake, a storm of pink petals flipped through the sky. The majestic display robbed me of reason for a moment.

I stared at the effortless cyclone of fuschia leaves, and the robed figure spread his arms wide. In that moment, he appeared holy, like a reincarnated saint. Schema recognized why.

Elijah Joan, the Fallen Seraph | Level 3,243 - One of the four followers of Yawm, Elijah is a powerful fighter with tremendous healing abilities. It's rumored that he carries a mountain in each of his boots, and the burdens he carries give him his immense weight. While this is unlikely, his constitution is unbelievable, along with his strength.

Little is known about Elijah outside of those factors and his angelic origins. One thing is clear, Elijah is a monster in his own right, and you would do well to avoid him at any and all costs.

As I finished reading the message, my stomach sank. A *follower* of Yawm outleveled Kessiah by over a thousand. I walked in the wake of his shadow, my abilities like a mound under a mountain's shade. Elijah glanced around, his face black under his hood. From his light side, he outstretched a pale hand that was remarkably human. He spoke aloud in a noble, piercing voice,

"I know you are here. You've done well with saving yourself from Yawm's holy wrath. You may join us, and receive his holy blessing. You need only step out into the light."

I moved up to get over the kitchen window, obeying his command. My eyes widening, I stared at my hands. He enchanted his voice or something, and I almost walked right into an unseen trap. I lowered my head, leaning against the wall. Elijah wouldn't call out if he already knew where I was. It was the same story for his 'rewards.' Yawm's version of payment showed itself on the people here.

Elijah continued, his voice beautiful as a crystal in light, "Please, do not be afraid, my child. We will cleanse you. If you have sinned, he will erase that sin from within. Yawm will bring it out, and use it as your power. Do you not wish to be cleansed? Have you gone mad? He may save you from madness as well."

I held my breath, a bead of cold sweat pouring from my forehead. Elijah's steps beat against the ground, one at a time as he moved towards me. He continued, "You will grow in ways you cannot imagine. Yawm will unlock your inner potential. All you must do is embrace your new flesh. Your new body. Your new mind."

At the end of the room, a polished teapot revealed Elijah's pacing form. The fallen seraph pulled the robe off his dark wing, revealing a twisted arm of intestines and long, thin hairs. The limb shivered and pulsed as he Elijah resonated,

"Yawm will show you a truer side of yourself. A side you deserve and must face. He will open you and reveal what is within you to the world. Only then may you overcome it."

My skin crawled as he stepped another step towards my hiding place. He stared off into the distance, tears falling from his eyes,

"We are so fortunate to live in a time where the holy one may help us. Where he may enlighten us. Bring us from the abyssal pit and into an endless light. A scorching light. A flaming light that sears and burns and belittles. Even if you do not believe, the new flesh will consume you and make you new. You'll believe me then. They all do. They all will."

His words dripped like a toxic honey, sweet as candy but deadly as venom. I wanted to stand without thinking. With an explosion of will, I forced the urge down and tightened my control. I coiled over my mind, letting nothing in or out. I froze in place, in a stasis. Elijah sighed before screeching out like tearing metal,

"I can see you. Come out...Little one."

40 Beneath Your Skin

I froze in place, my heart stopping. His voice compelled me to stand, but my mind roared at me to stay still. He could be lying, so I stayed seated, resisting the temptation of his voice once more. As time passed, the iron grip of my steeled mind loosened up. Sweat poured down my temples and forehead. Every part of my body screamed out, commanding me to stand and listen to him. His voice was a gun on my forehead, his words compelling me to obey.

Narrowing my eyes, I stayed firm. I bit my lip until blood poured into my mouth. The iron taste kept me together. It reminded me of all the blood outside and just what Yawm may do to me if Elijah found me. Even then, my mind's dominance crumbled, one piece at a time. As I resisted, mana flooded over Elijah, some kind of aura covering the entire area.

Elijah announced into the sky,

"If I must come and drag you out, you will be punished instead of rewarded. Now come."

He sounded like a knowing mother, stern yet gentle. It was like I stared at a cliff, and he told me to jump. Knowing it was wrong didn't change the fact I still wanted to. This demon disguised as an angel promised so much with so little. The tendrils of his voice dug into my eyes and ears. They invaded my mind, tearing me apart as I struggled to stay there.

I faltered, one of my feet pressing into the ground and pushing me up with a slow crawl. With my mouth clamped shut, I screamed in my mind for my leg to stop. It slowed, but I still rose up with a steady crawl. Desperate to escape, I retracted the armor from my leg before taking a deep breath. I sharpened my armored fingertips and dug them deep into my bare thigh. They dug into the meat of my leg, severing tendons and flesh.

The pain passed over with ease, but watching my thigh gush blood sickened me. The muscles in my thigh seized up. With my fingers inches deep, the leg finally stopped pushing me upwards.

Elijah grumbled, "Then I shall grab you myself. A pity considering you'll gain no rewards now."

He paced over, a walking thunderstorm. Hopelessness crawled over me, a dread that whittled away at my spirit. A part of me held onto any possibility at life, however. As Elijah's hand landed on the doorframe, I closed my eyes. I was done for. As Elijah peered over me, a shadow encompassed me from all sides. A warm, comfortable presence turned me invisible, my leaking blood and dripping sweat floating off the ground.

Elijah peered down, and he raised a bushy brow at the ground,

"Strange...I thought I sensed a life force here. A breath, a sweat, and a fear. Now there's nothing."

His irises opened wide, a handsome man staring down at me with a gentle smile. Across the cheek, the writhing intestines squirmed and moved under his skin. He peered up, shaking his head. "And I wished to save another one. This moment in time has been one disappointment after the next."

A tear plopped onto my head, floating on my invisible body. Elijah cried over me, the twisted angel staring forward and shaking his head. He turned, and he flapped his wings. A hurricane erupted across everything nearby. The house's insides shattered and mangled. Every glass popped. The walls wobbled. The door splintered and tables tore into the walls.

Elijah flew out into the air before gliding out into the distance. As he left, I fell down and heaved for breath. I leaned my head back against the wall, my hands and lips trembling. I pulled my hand out of my thigh. It regenerated, and my armor molded back over the wound. I gasped, wanting a way out of this damn place.

Peering down, Torix's shade covered me from head to toe still. I turned back towards the blockade behind me. I walked towards the back of the house. From the window, I inspected the defenses. Soldiers paced along the lines of the barricade. Elijah terrified them, his flying form a harbinger of destruction. That left them all alert and ready for action.

Compounding their vigilance, the commanders chewed them out when I busted through the blockade. Considering this infection's rampant spread, they couldn't afford any mistakes like that. Unfortunately for them, I prepared to pass by again. Running into the misty city had been a

calculated risk, one that blew up in my face. Gaining levels took the edge off that decision, but I never wanted another fight like that bloodbath.

Remembering the red and decay, my hands shook but not in fear as I expected. They jittered in anticipation, and my armor quivered in hunger. I raised a brow at myself, expecting a terrified trembling in place of brimming excitement. I enjoyed fighting more than I thought.

Either way, fighting through the Force of Iron was a cakewalk compared to the horrors of Springfield. I closed my eyes, thinking of what my old town was like once. Shaking myself out of that, Torix's shade hissed into my ear,

“Escape.”

It cloaked me in invisibility, and that eased any escapes I'd make. Taken aback, I pondered the shade's late arrival. If Torix cloaked me earlier, most of the turmoil could've been avoided. Putting that question in the back of my mind, I skulked up as close to the trooper's barricade as possible. I found a thinner part of the barricade within a house's distance from the soldiers. I built momentum in the house before leaping out of the second story window of a suburban home.

The mana heated my arms and legs, and the guards reacted far faster than before. That proved irrelevant compared to my emboldened strength and invisibility. I blistered over a car, hopping clear over it before jumping over and behind a house. Bullets rained in nearby, but the home blocked me from becoming a lead catching net.

After dashing over a few houses, I found my traversal flipped on its head. Before, I hopped fences with some difficulty. I ran around cars and flipped trucks. It took time to get through a suburbia. This time, I jumped over everything. Not needing to change direction or slow down all the time, I sped up to a respectable tempo, some closer objects blurring in my vision.

That was good, as I wanted to get the hell out of there. I sprinted across the terrain like my feet were on fire and the ground was lava. The shade evaporated my trail's marks, stopping any pursuers from following me. As I crashed through a blackberry bramble, I checked my messages.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - I've told the others of your message. I wish to apologize for my lack of knowledge regarding such a cataclysmic event; this ritual has consumed me. For our safety, Kessiah and I moved the marble plates elsewhere. I've marked the location on your map.

Considering I am already his enemy, I will send this Yawm fellow a message of some sort to derail his efforts. I've planted the seeds of his enmity. I shall now reap what I've sown. Kessiah escaping this mess takes priority, as she never agreed to handle this chaotic cluster of a situation.

As for your homeworld, we shall defend it. I've sent scouts, and they've ascertained the scope of this infestation. I sent you extra shades in case any of them are captured. Schema's speed and power be with you.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | **Unknown - The situation has changed. I've found reports of other worldly beings with unbelievable levels. You must escape. I've sent several shades to escort you out. Hide with all you have as your life depends upon it.**

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | **Unknown - Four of the five shades I've sent have been captured and eradicated. Get out of the area, as that being will find you there. If I come, they will sense my presence. I will only make it worse. Please, escape.**

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | **Unknown - I may only pray to Schema that you are alive and not captured.**

I smiled at the messages, my assumptions correct. The old necromancer did what he could for me. Brushing up on my status, our team's base situated itself near the town on the other side of Springfield. Finding a mountain of notifications, I surfed through them. I deleted the useless ones, like level ups or skill ups. I put the better ones to the side for handling other problems.

It reminded me of clearing out an inbox of an email, a little tedious but still productive. A unique message popped out of the bunch.

Yawm's Arrival(Quest of Survival**) - Yawm of Flesh has begun an infestation of Earth. This infestation must not be allowed to spread, so no sentients will be allowed to leave until after the quarantine's completion. It's up to you and your species to protect yourselves.**

From henceforth, you will receive doubled experience against Yawm's minions, Yawm's followers, and Yawm himself. Based on experience points earned, you will gain a bonus reward after the quest ends. The value of your reward will be determined based on your points earned.

You may turn in these earned points early for a lesser reward to assist with destroying the enemies. There will be six Sentinels placed near Springfield to assist with containment and an Overseer as well. The point system is as follows:

1 point for Spawns of Yawm and Summons of Yawm.

5 points for Grikes.

25 points for the Unnamed of Yawm.

50 points for any Named of Yawm.

100,000 points for Follower kills. The opportunity to obtain Sentinel rights are given to anyone who slays a Follower of Yawm. Rights are issued with the respective responsibilities.

100,000,000 points for killing Yawm. The opportunity for Overseer rights are given to the killer of Yawm. Rights are issued with the respective responsibilities. Unknown status revoked.

Experience multipliers count toward the points gained. May fortune favor you and your kind.

Current Point Total | 24

I peered at my notifications, trying to figure out when this announcement declared itself. It happened after I handled all of my enemies, but the points rushed in right after. I winced at my experience gains, as they didn't receive the same bonus. It counted from here on out, however, so I let the loss go.

In a way, this infestation served as an opportunity wrapped in a horrific package. If I killed hundreds of these monsters, levels would fall from the sky. I no longer had to worry about getting enough experience as an endless pit of it spread out before me. It took the form of old friends and my hometown's corpse, however.

Those thoughts tumbled in my head as I paced out of the forest and onto the grassy, rolling hills North of Springfield. I never explored where Torix set up camp, so everything proved new. The rolling hills sprouted with sparse trees here or there. This place was a series of abandoned pastures, the grass long and wild. Some old timers mentioned pioneers making farms and homes here before the actual midwest was found.

After that, everyone abandoned the area, only staying in Springfield because of the creeks here. Torix's mark planted down in the middle of this desolate series of fields. Getting up to it, the mark planted down on a cluster of woods bunched up at the center of several grassy mounds.

After crossing the fields, I reached the center of the hills. An old cellar from a frontier home lodged into the ground. It laid out there as inconspicuous as a rotting stump in a field. I almost missed it. I opened the door, bits of dirt falling down before I walked inside.

Freshly made earthen steps carved a path into the ground. Long, winding roots supported the tunnel and room at the basement. I stepped down into the underground home. A glowing pool of water lit the center of the large room. The same cyan glow ebbed off the pool as BloodHollow, giving an underwater hue to the marble plates all along the edges of the hill home.

Torix casted dominion mana from one palm to the other, the energy writhing in and out of his massive book. Roots restructured from the plants above, forming walls and rooms of the cavern. Althea hunched over a work desk lining a wall of the room, messing with some ammo from the

Force of Iron. She tied three vials together with a cable, mirroring a tribal bola thrown at people's feet.

Kessiah floated in the pool, casting a shadow onto the room's roof. The mana bended away from her, keeping her floating an inch or so above it. As I got into the room, no one noticed me at first. At least that's what I thought. Torix finished his incantation before turning towards me. He walked up with his hands interlocked behind himself, "I see you've found your way out of that predicament."

Torix's eyes flared green, "It is...It's very good to see you again, disciple."

I spread my hands, "Hah, it's good to be back."

Torix walked up and gave me a hug. Althea turned to me, and she smiled. She hopped over before giving me a hug too. As if being held by a bear, she lifted me with a squeeze, "Ah...It's good to see you. Sorry about leaving you like that."

I peered down, and I gasped out, "Did you get them back?"

Althea set me down, letting me breathe. She murmured, "I did, and it wasn't too bad getting here. You, uhm, did a great job getting on those jeep's nerves."

I raised my brow, "More like getting them bloodthirsty."

Althea scratched her cheek, "Whatever. It worked."

Kessiah turned a head to me, and she frowned, "You gained a *lot* of levels while out there. Did you take advantage of the new quarantine?"

My expressions turned cold, "You could call it that, if you wanted to. It was more like a bloodbath."

Kessiah stared back up, looking exasperated, "Yeah, well this is just the beginning. You think you're tired now? Wait until we've cleared everything out and killed Yawm." Kessiah let out a long sigh, "It might take years. *Years.*"

I peered at Kessiah then back to the others. I spread out my hands, "You're staying to help against Yawm? I thought you wanted to leave?"

Althea's shoulders slumped and Torix's eyes flared red. I messed up. Kessiah made snow angels in the mana water as she simmered, "Apparently, Torix's magic isn't working. I'm trapped, and I can't leave. I'm stuck fighting Yawm with you guys. Great. Just great."

Disappointed she'd stay, I crossed my arms and said, "What happened to warping her out?"

Torix coughed into a hand, "Ahem...I had believed that I couldn't finish the summoning ritual because of your mana signatures. I obviously shouldn't have doubted myself. I believe it was due to Schema's requirements for this 'Quest of Survival.' That and-

Kessiah leaned up by pushing up with her hands. The pool of glowing water bended under her while she shouted, "You couldn't get it to work because you're washed up. Worn out. Done for, old man."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "My ritual has worked hundreds of times before. I've augmented it since our arrival here, and it still doesn't work. I've told you this time and time again, but my ritual isn't the problem. Schema has sealed this world off for some reason, even to illegal means."

Althea peered down, not wanting to be a part of the conversation. I raised my brow, "Is it the quarantine?"

Torix shook his head, "It most certainly is yet isn't. Schema's performed a rather unique operation that I've merely read about in historical texts. The AI rendered this planet locked off from any methods of escaping it, even illegal warping measures from unknowns. In that manner, Schema pinned us here on Earth, forcing us to fight against Yawm."

I rubbed my temples, looking off in a random direction, "But, you're not using Schema's normal transport right? You could just warp out or, I don't know, fly a spaceship, right?"

Torix's eyes dampened, "Schema requires special permissions for unknowns to warp. We must face Yawm or watch this world be consumed and us along with it."

My eyes hardened as flashes of my fights flamed in my mind. I gave him a slow nod, "Huh...We'll have to fight him. Again, huh? That's...That's not good." I closed my eyes, "It is what it is then. We'll do what we have to do then."

Althea peered up at me, "Hey...Uhm, think about it. We're getting extra experience, and a lot of Yawm's soldiers are unknowns. That's quadrupled experience points. That puts us in a great place to level up, you know? Your armor can change too, while Kessiah and Torix are already really strong. They can guide us, so it's not all bad."

Althea tried cheering me up, but her words failed to do so. She didn't understand what we'd be running into soon, and I didn't have the heart to tell her. However, the fact she even tried to bring up my spirits, that brought a reluctant smile to my face. I gave her a sad smile, "We...We can catch up. No big deal, right?"

Althea's eyes brightened, "Exactly. We got your friends too."

Remembering Michael and Kelsey, I frowned, "How are they?"

Torix frowned, "They are stable...But I should warn you, they are both slowly dying. The Force of Iron has inspected the surroundings near the quarantine and anyplace downwind of the infection sights. It is truly unfortunate, but your friends were caught in the initial infection radius."

Steadying myself, I closed my eyes. I opened them at Torix, "So...Can we save them?"

Torix turned to face a wall, tapping his sides with his hands. He let out a long sigh, "I...I honestly don't know. They've been infested with numerous of the, hm, petal bugs, I suppose you can call them that. If it were one, then perhaps we'd have a chance to cure them. As is, they're turning despite the stasis pods and my cooling magic."

Torix placed a hand on my shoulder, "I know it's difficult having all of this sink in at once, but-

I nudged his hand aside, not out of refusal but to show my strength, "Thank you, but I'm fine. Let's talk about options to save them and what we can do right now. I don't have time to absorb everything that's happening, but I know that I'm not what's important about this situation right now. Getting them back and our current situation is what really matters."

My eyes hardened, "Right now, I'm a body, and I just have to move. That's it."

Althea reached out with a hand, but kept it at a distance, "You sure? It's your hometown and your friends. I can't imagine what that's like." She stared at her hands, poking her fingertips together, "And not just because I don't have friends or a hometown...It's just like, like a lot to take in. For me even. And it hasn't even happened to me. That's not to compare the two things, but uhm...You get what I mean...Hopefully."

I smiled at her, "I do."

Torix gave me a nod, "Hmm, if you're able to persevere, then by all means, do so. The realities are as such: first, the Followers overlevel us immensely. We'll need to kill them before Yawm arrives. Second, this quest dramatically speeds up both of your progressions toward fighting Yawm. Third, after Yawm has awakened, other, powerful sentients will arrive. They may ease our burden regarding the killing of Yawm himself."

Kessiah pulled herself out of the pool, jerking herself up and out with a single hand. She raised both arms overhead and stretched, "What the old sack of dry skin is trying to say is that I'm going to be taking you both out on raids. It's going to be boring for me, but we'll get you both leveled up."

I raised an eyebrow, "Raids, huh?"

Kessiah rolled a hand in circles, "You know, when people go out to kill tons of monsters."

I shrugged, "I've never been on one."

Torix flaming eyes flickered, "Why, I believe that's the only kind of outing you've ever had. Semantics aside, there's many details to discuss. Come, we'll sit there."

Torix pointed at the wall wide desk that Althea sat at. I sat there myself. Before I arrived, Torix summoned curled up roots from nearby grasses, making a surprisingly soft seating. I leaned onto the crafting table, "So, what kind of *raids* are we going out on?"

Althea bounced on her heels while walking over, "Torix and I talked about it. So, like, we'll be sneaking past the Force of Iron's barricade, killing some of those things, then coming back-" Althea noticed a change in my face, and she deflated, "Unless you don't want to, of course."

I numbed while staring forward, "If it's to survive, then that's what we'll do. What I think or feel isn't a part of the question."

Kessiah leaned back, "What happened to Mister Bloodlust? Sheesh, what a downer."

I frowned, "Kessiah. It's my hometown. I grew up here. It's gone now."

Kessiah walked over and placed a hand onto the wall beside me. She narrowed her eyes, "But like, you have a home, so there's that. Why so sullen about it? You had something to lose, so you could be grateful about that."

I expected to get in her face like before, but before I could Althea walked up to Kessiah. The remnant loomed over our sniper, a head taller than her and wider still. Althea stood up to that and snapped,

"I know you don't want to be here, but back off. I never had a home either, but that doesn't mean I don't understand how hard it must be to watch it crumble. So, er, give the guy a break. He's been through a lot...Er, please."

I glanced around, shocked at Althea's outburst. Kessiah and Torix shared my sentiment, each of them rendered speechless. I gave Althea a nod, "Huh...Thank you."

Althea put her hands on her hips, "Uhm...No problem."

Kessiah tilted her head, and Althea shrank down. Kessiah's brow furrowed before she laughed. The remnant put a hand on Althea's shoulder, and Kessiah relented, "Hah...Ok, ok. I know I can be an ass sometimes. I didn't want to fight here, and-" Kessiah looked away while waving a hand, "I just wanted to go back to my mercenary work. I was hitting a real hot streak before coming here."

Kessiah stepped off, spreading her hands, "But, Torix can't get me out of here, and neither can I. I'll try to make the best of this situation and see where it goes." Kessiah looked at me, "And sorry for always putting pressure on you. Something about you just rubs me the wrong way. I

don't know what it is, but I'll try to get a handle on it." Kessiah smirked, "Emphasis on *try*. No guarantees here, little man."

I stated, "I don't expect anything from you at this point."

My scathing words bounced right off Kessiah, and she clapped her hands, "Good. So, I really want to be the one that kills Yawm. Getting rid of my unknown status would open up a lot of doors that have been shut for a long time. Any ideas on how to make that happen?"

An edge lingered in her voice, one of the few times she exposed any vulnerability. I calmed myself down, not biting at the opportunity. We'd be working together for a while, so I might as well establish a decent relationship if I could. I stood up, "Althea and I will level up in the raids. We'll amass our abilities until we become sizable threats."

Torix swung a hand, "And I shall be whittling down the majority of Yawm's forces. My summons and tactical knowledge shall prevent any unwanted run-ins with Yawm's troops in those circumstances. The Followers are particularly important in that regard." Torix gave Kessiah a nod, "If you'd like to, I don't mind you taking Yawm's head. I know the unknown status weighs on you far more heavily than it does me."

Kessiah leaned back, "Oh...Uh, well...Thanks."

I raised a brow, "When's the next raid planned?"

Torix waved his hands, "I'm ascertaining the location of Yawm's Followers as we speak. I'll then create distractions for when you go out on your raids. Just as well, I assumed you'd need some rest when you came back. It was a difficult outing from what I could gather."

I shook my head, "I'll be fine. We can go whenever."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Look, tough guy, you don't have to pretend you're made of stone."

I raised my hand, the armor shifting, "I'm not. I'm made of metal."

Kessiah glared at me, but I glared back. She crossed her arms, "Hm...Ok, do whatever you want. I'm going back to the pool."

I shrugged, "Whatever you want. Does anyone know where Michael and Kesley are? I just want to check on them."

Torix tapped the edge of the table, uncomfortable as someone with a rock in their shoe. I frowned, "Are they worse than you let on?"

"We're working towards a solution, but my understanding of human biology is limited, as is my understanding of the petal bugs. For now. They're in that room...In the back."

Hopping up, I walked back into the recesses of the dirt cavern. Torix grew roots to support the walkways, each of them intertwining into elegant arches. At the back was a small, earthen room where the two containment tubes leaned against the wall. Mana crystals powered the pods, keeping them stable. Someone removed the metal plates, exposing all of Kelsey and Michael floating in suspended motion.

For a while, I watched them bob up and down. I paced up and sat on a bed of moss on the opposite end of the room. I leaned onto my knees as I stared at them both. It was a weird feeling. On the one hand, I controlled nothing about the situation. They fought my help off and set themselves up for failure. On the other hand, I might've been able to save them.

I stared down at my armored palms, the runes jagged. Keeping these two alive would take a lot out of me. Finding a cure in time, keeping myself alive, and saving a few townsfolk required every bit of my attention from here on out. If anything, I stretched myself thin as peanut brittle, ready to snap at any time and any moment. To handle what I wanted to handle, I'd need to stretch even more.

Most of that came from how complicated the situation became. I preferred things when they were simple. See bat? Smash bat. See giant hivemind? Smash giant hivemind. Keeping these two alive meant working with a few more variables, so it wouldn't be so straightforward. I peeled back my armor from my face before standing up. I was dwelling on the situation, and that changed nothing.

Anytime I spent too long thinking, I ended up depressing myself. I walked up and tapped the container, sending a ripple through the tube before leaning against it. The stasis pod tugged at my mana as I closed my eyes for a second. I gave it a slight tap with a fist, grimacing at the two old friends.

Michael's eyes hollowed out like a man hanging from a noose. Black veins reached out of the side of his neck, down his arms, and up his abdomen. Kelsey's mouth broke apart, a metamorphosed tentacle crawling out of her mouth. Some skin split in her fingers, and from the gashes, claws reached out. Ice shards splintered their skin in several places, Torix's magic stemming an otherwise unstoppable tide.

I took a deep breath, and I murmured,

"What am I even supposed to do?"