

## 22 Dungeon Delver

I pointed at myself, "You mean me?"

Torix spread his arms, "Who else is here?"

"Ok, first off, what's a conduit?"

"A way of channeling energy. In your case, you will act as a reservoir of her excess energy."

I raised my hands, "You want me to take in the energy that turns her into that deformed, disgusting, and horrific abomination from earlier?"

Torix raised a finger, "Yes, but allow me to explain. I wouldn't imagine doing this to you if not for your fight earlier. You were covered in her blood numerous times, and you even swallowed a portion of her forearm using that armor of yours."

I flinched while remembering that. Torix waved his hands, "You'll find no judgment from me for your fighting methods. My main point is that you've already dealt with quite a bit of the energy that deformed her, yet it took no toll on you whatsoever."

I frowned, "What? I have?"

"Yes."

"But that's her body, not her mana."

"She has blood magic just as you do."

I furrowed my brow, "I thought blood magic was rare?"

"It is, but it's by no means nonexistent. Regardless, she's here with that quality. I tested her blood on a minion of mine, and it had to be destroyed. That underling devolved into a monster and with far less of her energy than your own exposure."

I lifted my hands, my palms facing me, "So...So this armor just ate the energy."

"Indeed. From what I've seen of it, it absorbs any kind of energy it's exposed to. Remember those evolutions you mentioned? This conduit will allow you to evolve faster and stabilize her condition at the same time. We may keep tabs on her via that conduit as well."

I narrowed my eyes at Torix, "Can you actually stop this, um, conduit if it begins going awry?"

Torix nodded, "I may, thought at a cost. I did so to Althea earlier, as you saw. I could do the same feat for you as well, though I'd never allow the energy to go haywire for that length of time. I'd step in the moment anything amiss occurred."

I leaned back, "That's going to be a lot of risk you're asking me to take on."

Torix shrugged, "It's part of the process for understanding your armor. Remember, you offered your services as an exchange for finding your friends. This is a part of that. I understand it's rather distasteful, but so is peering out at random in search of those close to you."

I rolled my shoulders, "Yeah, you're right. We'll...We'll do it." I raised a hand at Torix, "But you'd better stop it if anything starts going haywire."

Torix steepled his fingers, "Remember who you're talking to. I treat my experiments like I treat my plans; they are always under my control."

Equal parts unnerving and reassuring, I spread out my hands, "So, what do I need to for this conduit thing?"

Torix picked up the bowl, swirling it some, "You've handled all of the necessities already. This is the most vital aspect of your assistance. I merely wished for your verbal agreement before treading onward. This will take days in order to finalize, after all."

I grinned, "So I'm free to go for a while?"

He dabbed an instrument into the bowl of bright purple, "Absolutely. Do stay alive, as other scavengers might be out and about at this point. You're quite unfortunate to have met so many already, but I'll continue safeguarding you while you search out your dungeon cores."

Torix stabbed Althea with tiny pricks of a needle, coloring her skin. He continued, "Be careful, and I'll send you a message when you need to return henceforth."

I squeezed my hands to fists, "Alright, cool. I'll be off then. Cya Torix."

"You as well."

I ran past zombies, knights, skeletons, and a variety of undead before finding the large loop of BloodHollow. Nearing the doors out, I strolled up to the sentinel. I raised up a hand, "Can I complete two of the quests sent by Schema?"

The sentinel peered down at me, "Ah, yes. I'll connect you with one of his AI's. They should be able to handle your trite little quest."

I blinked, "Uh, yeah, I know what you mean. A quest personally given by Schema himself. Psh, how trite and *little*."

The Sentinel froze in place. He simmered, "Just get your rewards and leave me."

A robotic voice sounded in my ears, "Two quests completed. Rewards will be received via notification. Thank you for your continued assistance. Goodbye."

The servant AI for Schema spoke in absolute monotone. The voice justified Stacy and David's assumptions about who and what Schema was. I knew better now, after having spoken with a fragment of its mind. Either way, I scrolled through my menu, finding the notifications.

**Gorge on Horrors(Unknown Tier Quest) - You are a monster. Become the eater of monsters.**

**0/4,000,000 ambient mana eaten | Timeline(2 months)**

**He Who Slays the Eater of Worlds(Legendary Unique tier quest) - Most never enter a dungeon in their lifetime. You have been commanded to destroy many. Good luck.**

**0/6 Dungeons cores obtained | Timeline(2 years left)**

The quests changed their names, sounding much larger in scope. Inspecting each update, my brow crinkled. I spoke out, "All I got was a notification to complete the next tier of the quest. What the hell is this?"

The Sentinel stated, "That is your reward. The opportunity to further serve your savior."

I rolled my eyes before walking out of the dungeon. After grumbling for a few minutes, I opened my minimap. Finding dungeons of any quality and caliber proved simple and easy. I passed several of them on my way to the Evergreen Ravine. Taking a few laps of the nearby forest, I found a dozen just chilling in the middle of nowhere. On the one hand, a part of me heartened at how easy they were to find.

Another part of me dreaded the idea of dungeons dotting the countryside everywhere. If the monsters within escaped, the consequences made my skin crawl. I pushed the thought aside since I struggled to find two friends let alone save everyone. Keeping my head down and focusing on myself, I inspected my minimap, finding a dungeon about three miles away.

I passed it on my way towards the Evergreen Ravine where dinosaurs and phoenixes roamed. A few minutes later, I traveled towards the nearest landmark, Pier's Creek. Stepping up to it, a few new fauna darted around the countryside nearby. The creek's surface rippled with smooth, dark stones littering its bed.

Hopping into the stream, the water plopped from around me. No water seeped into my shoes, the armor airtight in all respects. Traversing the crevice, different mushrooms, algae, and

crawfish darted around. These tiny mushrooms hopped every few seconds, jumping onto nearby algae.

The algae kept near the water's edge for that reason, staying in the wet shelter of the stream. This shimmering, bluegreen muck swallowed any nearby crawfish, melting the shell and devouring the meat under the chitin. To my surprise, the crawfish indulged on any mushrooms falling into the water. This consuming cycle kept each piece of life at bay.

Following these strange lifeforms, I followed Pier's Creek before finding a waterfall. About half my height, the series of rapids stuck out like a sore thumb. I followed this stream for miles in both directions, and without a doubt, this stream lacked anything resembling a waterfall. Getting near it, I listened. Flowing water hummed in my ears like the engine of a car.

Beyond the gush, a slight clicking echoed from beyond the water wall. I passed through the waterfall, finding myself drenched and facing a tiny cavern. Bingo. I crawled into the tunnel, claustrophobia pressing in from all sides. That fear surged from the idea of a creature finding me, not the walls themselves.

No cretin found me helpless, so I passed beyond the tunnel and into an opening. The water below carved a middle to this place, two walls of rock wrapping around it. Glowing seaweed lit up from the stream, offering light into the entire hollow. Massive crabs walked around the currents, snapping for fish and nibbling on the glowing seaweed.

Offering more light, crystals lined the wall, glowing azure as an untainted sky. Pacing up towards these crystals, my armor squirmed in place. A shining mist flowed off the glowing gems and flooded my armor. The once shining crystal dampened its glow. Finding more ways of fueling my armor, I turned to the crabs.

**Baby Deep Dweller | lvl 14 - This is essentially the larval state of the deep dweller. They feed on algae and various fish until creating a cocoon and transforming into their adult state. They can then feed on much larger prey before growing once more. This molting process continues until they reach behemothic sizes, able to tear down skyscrapers in a single hit.**

**This is a new colony without any adult deep dwellers. Fully grown deep dwellers can snap their claws with such speed and power that they create sonic booms with resulting explosions. Other variants can snap out their claws with an intensity few creatures can match. They are heavily armored and muscled creatures in this state, with a variety of violent, effective attacks.**

**These little guys, however, can't do any of that. They are just the inklings of a much grander species. Face this inkling, you will never face their true horrors.**

The deep dwellers followed an evolutionary path, one requiring time to incarnate. Robbing the creature of said time, I crushed the closest crab under a heavy heel. One stomp led to another,

and I chained a series of hops together. By the time I left, the cavern carried more seafood than a fish market. The perks and stats coordinated together, making my leaps land with devastating efficiency.

Further benefits mounted.

**New Skill! Stomp(lvl 1) - The lifting of one's heel and driving it downward: that is a stomp. This simple, unrefined attack defies its simple origins, becoming an attack worthy of fear. Levels add additional stomp speed and force.**

Making the most of my time, I tossed rocks as I stomped from crab to crab. Balancing while aiming stones took some practice. I wobbled on the monsters, the caving of crab shells and throwing of small stones exhausting me. I gained a grip on it after a while, timing the tosses with the landing of my feet.

I levied the contrasting forces so they evened out more, and after several hours, the tiring turned into tedium. Willpower and the resulting perks from it kept me sharp and focused during this time. A bit of skill leveling later, and I reached the boss. As expected, an older, adolescent deep dweller stood at the end of the subterranean stream.

Less a normal crab and more a shelled spider, its twitching eye stalks zoned in on me. Streaks of blue trailed down the orange top of the creature, zigzagging its surface. It raised clawed hands, one far bulkier than the other. It snapped the larger limb, a snapping sound rippling out. Water nearby cascaded away, the flow of water reversed for a moment.

I picked up a rock, snapping the stone against the crab. It blocked with the thickened shell of its arms. Snapping off my feet, I closed the distance and tackled the monster. It dragged back on its feet, portions of its body cracking. I whipped down, avoiding a snapping claw, and I picked up a rock at the same time.

I lobbed the rock into one of its eyes, the eye stalk breaking. The crab covered the wound while I rocked a heavy hook into its exposed gut. The belly of the beast crushed, my hand dashing through the flesh and chitin. I gurgled on its orange ooze while I reached in and up its chest. Grabbing a mass of organs, I pulled its insides out.

It squirmed as one eyestalk submerged into the shell, a pit of steaming entrails lying at my feet. The creature died seconds after. Staring around, my armor ingested the nearby creature, and the dungeon core popped up in my inventory. I smiled at my notifications.

**[Brilliant(Intelligence of 20 or more) - Your intelligence is amazing. 1/10th of intelligence added to luck. Mental skills are gained twice as quickly.**

**[Genius(Intelligence of 25 or more) - Your intelligence is incredible. Another 1/10th of intelligence added to luck. Doubles effect of mental skills. Level of mana(Health due to Blood Magic) no longer affects mental acuity.]**

**[Omniscient(Intelligence of 30 or more) - You are all knowing. +5 mana per point of intelligence. +2 mana per level. Increased critical thinking and memory per level. Emotional tolerance doubled. Spells may be cast silently. Doubles mana costs.]**

**[Piercing(Perception of 20 or more) - Your perception is amazing. Levels can no longer be blanked out, unless the target is unknown. Extra data on enemies is categorized into your personal archive. Minimap data improved to include terrain, obstacles, and enemies.]**

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

Hoping the mana turned into health, I selected the Omniscient. Hitting finalize, my anatomy shifted. A primal change rushed in like a tempest, my thoughts clearing up a bit. Blood Magic altered the perk's impacts, turning the mental into the physical.

Arcane bonds spread throughout my skin, bones, and even blood. I increased my entire body's density from these matrices of magic. When I clenched my fist, they bended with me. When I breathed in, these magic circuits coursed through my veins. Like another layer of protection, they held me together, solid as any substance.

That arrived with a subtle shift in my clarity and togetherness. Wielding the refreshing mental change, I analyzed my character screen.

#### **Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen**

**Health - 2,456/2,456 | Health Regen - 357.2/min | Stamina - 1,040/1,040 | Stamina Regeneration - 31/sec | Damage Resistance - 96.5% | Mental Resistance - 96.5% | Physical Power - (+)350% | Damage Increase - 5%**

**Aura - Oppression | Current Damage: (6,000 + 20% of your health)/minute within a 120ft radius.**

My health augmented from the mana bonuses of the intelligence perks. Combined with my armor's health and resistance bonuses, and my generic bulk rose well beyond a normal system dweller. Thinking of Althea's spears, I frowned. Metal or not, they shouldn't have pierced me with that kind of ease.

I clanked my fists together, my blood thick and my flesh thicker. Normal spears would've rebounded off my armor, but the scout's could kill me. More mysteries mounted around her and

her origins, but I held my curiosity at bay. Dungeons required clearing, and so far, no dungeon since BloodHollow even touched me.

My situation stemmed from being overleveled, mostly from spawning in a dungeon but also from Torix's help. Unlike my circumstances, Michael and Kelsey might not be ahead of the leveling curve. Setting them up with controlled or weakened enemies might work, but how I'd do that, I had no clue. Getting Torix's insights and methods could help me out there.

But maybe with a bit less blood and guts involved.

Those thoughts drifted through my mind while I traveled towards the next nearest dungeon. For now, getting myself up to speed took priority.

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Roots peeled from the ground, wrapping around my neck. They flooded towards my mouth, my ears, and my eyes. Rushing into my helm, I stayed calm as the center of a storm. The teeth of my helm snapped shut, and I pulled out the creature below. A cluster of plants darted in and out of a mole's back, some kind of virus having overwhelmed the creature.

Now subservient, this mole corpse snapped its teeth at me. I tore out its bottom jaw, rotten sinews and joints pulling apart with ease. I hooked the jawbone into its eye socket, and the controlled body died. With no control center, the root cluster crawled from the mole's back. It raced up my arms towards my face before I popped a sweet smelling core at its center.

The cluster fell apart, ropey tendrils collapsing around me. My armor consumed the wooden remains, turning the chaos in my wake into energy for its evolution. Stomping out with another core in tow, I dove out of a mammoth tree on Red Hill. Splinters rained down from my descent, my feet lodging into the dirt below.

My armor swallowed the dungeon core in my palm before a ding echoed in my status. It wasn't from the core.

**Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 - I've finished the procedures necessary for the conduit's completion. You may come back and we'll commence with the procedure.**

I frowned at the message, unnerved but still motivated. I fought over the last few days, getting all of the missing points required for my perks. I gained Brilliant, Genius, Piercing, and Flexible. The perception perk, Piercing, let me find other dungeons, and the extra luck from the intelligence perks may have helped me out already.

It was hard to say.

Those same intelligence perks showed few changes for me. I expected a pretty significant alteration for my mind, yet no true change exposed itself. Even thinking of the increasingly

complex system formulas left me overwhelmed. Taking the sting off those unmet expectations, the cores themselves took little time and effort to collect.

The reason for that came from how fresh the dungeons were; most of the dungeons and rifts held babies or larvae from different species. Just reading the statuses, each species carried immense potential given time. I could imagine myself falling behind their growth rates if I stood still system wise, but that wouldn't be a problem. Ever since the system started, I hustled.

Something about the change motivated me.

Apparently, no one else shared my sentiment. I found no one else running around and clearing dungeons. David and Stacy proved to be exceptions to the norm as most people searched for the missing and dead. It left me thinking about humanity's future as a whole. If we, as a species, took our sweet time organizing against these dungeons, they'd snowball out of control.

Of course, I didn't fault anyone for searching people out. I did the same. During my dungeon hunting, I set up a route to cross by Michael's house. Searching his country cottage up and down, I uncovered an abandoned home. Unlike Kelsey's residence, no creature's invaded to force Michael's family away.

In fact, no sign of Michael's family materialized at all. No piece of furniture or hunting prize moved at all. I found their kitchen untampered with, their hunting supplies unmoved. I considered taking one of their bows, but I lacked any training for it. If they came back, they'd find more use from the weapon than I would.

But that assumed they ever came back. With multiple weeks passing since the system arrived, I doubted that possibility. I dreaded the other explanations for why Michael and his family disappeared. I considered Torix abducting them as a leverage point, but that didn't add up. The almighty necromancer could just run his experiments on me by force at anypoint. Going through the trouble of hiding my friends required more effort than simply overpowering me.

As for other outcomes, they haunted me. Michael and his loved ones could've died during the tutorial like plenty of other people. That fear stuck out in my mind like a festering wound on someone's face - an ugly yet undeniable reality. I held that apprehension back like holding a fiery coal in my hand. Barely tolerated, the dread would overwhelm me if I didn't resolve my fears soon.

That's why I tore through the forest floor as I raced towards BloodHollow. Roots snapped under my stomping heels and branches cracked on my swinging arms. Thirteen dungeon cores rattled somewhere within the depths of my armor, stored in an unseen place. I used up four of them, leaving me plenty for getting the perks related to luck, perception, and some from charisma.

Progress amassed elsewhere as well. I trained various skills while handling the dungeons, from throwing to stomping to jumping. I collected about 500,000 ambient mana during the process



along with eighty seven skill levels. I put them in Obliterator as I strode into BloodHollow. The Sentinel and I exchanged the usual banter, and I reached Torix an hour later.

In the center of the dungeon, Althea hovered over the ground. Torix dressed her in a pair of fitted robes, like something he'd give an acolyte. A new tattoo covered up towards the back of her neck, disappearing into her flush hair. Peering at the markings, they imitated the runes on the wall, though Torix's lacked the same complexity.

I walked up, "So what's the plan for Althea?"

Torix pulled out a clear crystal from his bag, "The conduit's creation has been finalized for her, and the last steps lay with you. We'll set the energy to fill into this empty mana gem. The crystal shall then fill up in time. You simply must attempt to absorb the energy within the crystal. If anything goes askew, simply cease the mana absorption. I shall pull the energy's impact from you thereafter."

I leaned over the clear, glassy stone, "Damn. That actually doesn't sound as crazy as I first thought. This sounds about as safe as absorbing mutating energy can be."

Torix shrugged, "You mentioned apprehension at the idea, and I had the time to set a test parameter first." Torix tossed the gem at me, and I caught it. Torix paced up to Althea, "Ready yourself for her awakening, as the mana shall then begin its production. Speak up if you feel odd."

Torix raised his hands, his umbral, dark mana oozing from his fingertips. It leaked into the table, charging the runes and incantations. Torix talked as he channeled energy, "Likely the person with a vested interest will send others to come collect Althea. They won't let her go without at least some resistance, surely. Be prepared for the impending force, though given her level, I doubt anyone worthy of repute shall show."

Althea twitched before her eyes slid open. She pressed her hand against the cave floor before glancing up. Her eyes glazed over, the comatizing magic ambling out of her. Pulling herself up, she glanced around before her eyes set to mine. Her expression of wonder took me back for a second, but the curiosity crumbled into abject horror.

Her eyes widened, "Wait...What's going on?"

Torix gestured around himself, "You're in my lair. I've captured you to uncover what you know-"

She raised her hand, "I-I need my armor. I need the medicine. Give me my medicine."

Torix waved a finger at her, "There will be no need for that, and just as well, don't interrupt me as well when I'm speaking." Torix's eyes flared bright, "Or I shall remove your ability to do so."

Althea's chest heaved as she held back the urge to vomit. Glaring down at her hands, she trembled, "Leave. I'm going to change. I-I don't want to rush under your skin."

The tattoo along her back sheened purple. A violet fire, it dimmed the room as if absorbing the light around it. Althea panicked, grabbing around herself,

"Did...Did you not hear me? Run." She pulled herself into a ball, her whole body convulsing in fear, "Away. Any second now and...I'm going to turn."

After a few seconds of trembling, nothing happened. The conduit worked, and her mana pooled into the small gemstone in my hand. Before I could even connect with it, my armor swallowed the crystal. I took a step back, and Torix spread out his arms, "What have you done?"

I put a hand to my chest, "Me? I didn't do anything." I hit my armor, "This did it."

Althea winced, "Wait, what happened? Why isn't it coming out? I should already have changed."

Torix and I met each other's eyes, a silent conversation taking place in a moment. Torix interlocked his arms behind himself, and I stood tall. The lich stated, "Why, my plan has all worked out precisely as I intended it to."

I nodded, "Oh most definitely."

Torix raised a hand, "This conduit has created a permanent connection between you two, siphoning excess mana from you to his armor."

I spread my hands, "Yeah, so you don't need to pump yourself with that gunk anymore."

Torix took a step closer to Althea, hovering over her with an aura of dread, "And therefore, you will tell us what you know of both your employers and reasons for being here."

Althea blinked, tears tracing down her cheeks. Torix stepped back as Althea heaved deep breaths and coughed. Ignoring us, she raised trembling hands, "I...I'm not turning. I'm here. I'm me."

Torix and I glanced at each other again, and we gave her some space. We'd get our answers, but we let her have a second to herself. I watched as waves of emotion coursed through Althea, the scout overwhelmed by new sensations. She raised her hands,

"I can't believe it. I-I can feel the air and the stone. Hah. Hah." She smiled, touching her robe, "This is incredible. This, wow. I can't believe it. I'm not turning."

With light steps like someone in ballet, she hopped across the stone. The robe flowed around her while she spun in circles, spreading her arms and staring up. She rolled over the ground,

meandering her form in different ways. A light hop followed a heavy stomp, and she shifted around with a childish glee.

Her wonder proved infectious, and I found myself having a small grin on my own lips. Torix leaned to me, "It would appear she's never tasted freedom before, hm?"

I put my hands on my hips, "Yeah, it would seem so."

Torix stepped up to Althea after letting her run wild for a while. He stood a head taller than Althea, Torix's form imposing and noble. Torix glared down with his fiery eyes,

"Enough fun here. Answer my questions."

Recognizing our presence for the first time, Althea stared at us like a deer in headlights. She made herself smaller,

"Uh, who are you guys?"

Torix placed a palm to his chest, "I'm Torix. This is Daniel. Now, why are you here, and who sent you here as well?"

Althea squinted, searching her memories, "I'm here for training. I'm supposed to become someone's follower, in time."

Torix's eyes flared bright, "Follower? So it's a guild leader then?"

Althea blinked, confusion spreading over her face, "I-I think so. Maybe?"

Torix sighed before turning a palm to her, "You may play out your ignorance as you'd like. I shall not believe this charade of bewilderment."

Her eyes narrowed, "I'm not lying. I don't know."

Torix tilted his head, "What of your employer?"

Althea peered down, "He's a plant. Alm? Awm? Something like that."

Torix remained motionless before seething, "If you think I'm a fool, simply say so aloud. I shall prove you wrong thereafter should I be required to do so."

Althea took a step back in fear, "I'm telling you what I know. Why would I want to lie for him? He lied to me about what and who I am. They told me I needed the armor and my medicine or else I'd turn."

She stared down, her hands trembling, "They lied to me, so I'm not about to lie for them."

Like a spreading infection, the shaking of her hands travelled up her arms. It hit her chest, and she gasped. One of her hands swelled before her back shifted under her robe. Torix stepped away from her,

“It would seem even a conduit isn’t enough for you to fully control yourself. Your mastery of your mind and body is rather lacking, isn’t it?”

She snapped, a claw rupturing from one of her fingertips. She growled out, “Leave. I still can’t control it.”

I walked up, turning a hand to her, “You can. You wouldn’t have stayed stable at all if you couldn’t.”

She snarled at me, her voice deforming again, “Well I can’t anymore, so run. It’s taking me over.”

I raised my hands, “You sure you’re not just letting it? Have you ever tried controlling it before?”

“Of course I have. I can’t do it. It runs over and spills out. I spill out.”

In the back of my mind, I found a flow of mana coming in from her mana crystal. It channeled her excess mana into my armor without any issues. Armed with that knowledge, I crossed my arms,

“There’s nothing spilling out. My armor’s handling it.”

Torix pressed the sides of his temples, “Althea, you’re telling me that your control of your own mana is so poor that just a normal amount overwhelms you? I’ve heard of mana devolution but never with someone owning Blood Magic. Have you never lived without sedation before?”

Althea’s eyes shifted in color, her voice a grating drone, “Not since my change.”

Torix dragged a hand down his face, “I suppose I shall contain it for you then. I do wish I could spend my time studying the runes instead, but, alas, you’ll devolve if I don’t contain you any longer.”

Knowing that added time to finding Michael and Kelsey, I stepped up, “Wait a minute. Let me handle it. I’ll keep her detained until she gets a grip. You just study the runes.”

Torix gave me the look of a skeptical librarian, “That’s quite the undertaking you’ve decided to take upon yourself. Aren’t you supposed to be leveling?”

Obliterator’s constraints changed my priorities, giving me some free time. Althea shivered as her arm finished deforming into a tendril of meat and sinews. I walked up with my fists claspings, “I

have enough dungeon cores for what I need. I'm not trying to level up right now either. Just think of this like it's training my combat skills."

Torix eyed me up and down before giving me a slow nod, "If...If you are willing, I shall not refuse your good will. Do as you wish."

He stepped over towards the runes, creating another mana chair. After erecting a barrier of energy around himself, he shouted, "Do let me know if she overwhelms you?"

"I will."

Althea's other arm trembled into a rack of spikes and bones. Skin split and blood gushed as it did, and she howled out in agony. She spread her arms, her mana overwhelming her. Althea roared before charging at me, pulling herself forward with engorged arms. I raised my hands, "You'll get your senses back."

I grimaced, "Whether I have to beat them into you or not."

## 23 Rise

I shifted sideways, my feet dragging on the ground. Where I stood, Althea clashed her upper limbs into the ground. Cracks ebbed from the dirt, her arms broken. I snapped a few potshots into her side before she swung an arm at me. I braced for the impact, and it slammed into my blocking arm.

A ringing, skin ripping impact raced through me. My vision flipped while I spiralled through the air. I flopped sideways, rolling on the ground. Pushing myself up, I spit out some blood from my mouth. The transmogrified Althea whipped her arms, straightening the bones out. She gurgled out in pain as her bones healed,

"I hate. Hate. Hate. Hate."

I shook my head, "Ok, well it's obvious you're not all there just yet."

Black veins crawled up the sides of her face, "This is no game."

Her head twitched, and she charged again. She slammed another hand at me from overhead. I leaned sideways, her arm scraping my shoulder spikes. Blood dripped down my shoulder as I hit her stomach. The flesh caved in, but she slung her other arm into my exposed side. I dragged on my feet, ribs breaking out like a chorus of screaming in my chest.

Blood spilled out from between my teeth. I grimaced as she came at me again. Instead of waiting, I charged at her. My fist clashed against her face, snapping bones and hurling her

sideways. She growled out while trying to hit me again. I dipped under her attack, snapping two quick hooks into her side.

Blood sprayed over me, raining from her monstrous form. She howled out, "It hurts. Hurts. Pain."

I glared up, "Good. Snap the hell out of it."

She took a step back, her form rippling like waves in an ocean. I gave her some breathing room before her jaw opened wide. It kept sliding open, her neck exposing veins and shifting lungs. My eyes twitched as fear raced up my spine. My knees wobbled as she spread her arms towards me, veins springing to life in her exposed chest.

I activated Oppression, Torix well out of the aura's range. Althea bellowed out in torment, her eyes bleeding, her form quivering. She slurred her speech, "So much pain. So much."

I walked up, "You can stop it. Pull yourself together."

Her jaw reattached to her head, so I stopped Oppression. Her open chest healed. She held up her arms before her eyes widened. She whipped her gargantuan limbs at me. Well out of range, the air whirled around her arms. Shaking my head, I put my hands on my hips. The animalistic, instinctual attack didn't even account for range.

Tearing my nonchalance apart, a vibrant pain ripped through my chest. Several small spines slid through my armor. I took a step back, finding lances of bone having torn through my armored skin. I grabbed each lance, jerking them out before seething, "So you're still in there, unless your monstrous half is where you get your good ideas."

Althea heaved, "I...It's over me."

I narrowed my eyes, "For now."

I got close, Oppression coming back on. She winced, exposing herself. I snapped a hook into her side then head, her body tearing at each hit. She stumbled back before I dashed forward. I slung my fist at her head, ripping and gouging out chunks of bone and skin. My next few strikes, she dodged by weaving her head.

A realization popped in my head at that. So far, each time she experienced pain, her sentient side avoided it. While I didn't enjoy tearing her down like this, no other alternative presented itself. I kept the pressure high, bolting forward and hitting her anytime she exposed herself. As I hoped, she reacted and learned how to handle my basic punches.

The gorefest turned into a more tactical combat as I forced her to adapt. Each adaptation resulted in her mind coming back, piece by piece. In time, minutes of fighting turned to many

minutes and then eventually hours. We created a meta of combat, each of us gaining different rotations for varying styles of strikes.

By the time she got her body back in order, I gave her a begrudging grin, "You like fighting, huh?"

She sweat while dipping under one of my jabs, "I-I guess so."

I parried one of her punches before giving her chest a kick. She followed the inertia of the attack, sliding back. She stared down at herself, her form reconstituted, "Hah...I did it. I can't believe it."

I stood back up, letting my hands fall to my sides, "See? You got this."

She rubbed the sides of her face, "You know, I never had this happen before. The scientists told me I'd never have a chance at controlling myself without the sedatives." She frowned at me, "Though the medicine was never this painful."

I shrugged, "If I had a different way of doing this, I would, alright?"

She narrowed her eyes, "Hm...If you say so."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, "Look, here's the thing, I need to get answers from you. I want to find some of my friends, and to make that happen, I have to satisfy that lich's curiosity about this ritual and my armor."

I turned a palm to her, "So start talking. Where did you come from?"

She leaned back, "I don't know. I've always been in a lab until something happened to me. After that, I was, uhm, experimented on...I think." She shivered, "So it's like I was living a haze, a dream of some kind. This is one of the first times I've been fully awake since before the change."

I rolled my hands, "You keep mentioning a change of some kind. Any idea what it was?"

Her eyes went distant, "I don't know what it was, but I know that after it happened, things changed. After that, I started...turning. I had no problems before, but now...I can't control myself."

She peered off, grabbing her elbow. I raised my hand, "No, you're wrong. You *couldn't* control yourself. Look. You're talking to me just fine right now."

She looked up, blinking in surprise. I raised a fist, "Don't sell yourself short. People will do that for you already."

Her brow furrowed, "Huh. I guess you're right. I, hm...If I keep myself together like this all the time, there's all kinds of stuff I could go and do." She smiled, staring at her hands, "I wouldn't have to go back."

I raised an eyebrow, "Wait a minute...You don't want to go back?"

She took a step back, her body shivering again. She lifted her neck, and she rumbled, "I...It's happening again." She fought the energies in her head, the palpating, pulsing mana coursing through her, deforming her, muting her. She gawked into the distance, her eyes glazing over. Terror leaked into those eyes, tears welling in them.

She growled, "Do you think I can control this?"

Wanting her sane so I could find Michael and Kelsey, I stated with a voice like stone, "I know you can. You will." I clanked my gauntlets together as she let out a low rumble. I growled back, "Alright then. Round two."

She charged at me, her body swelling in size once more. I met her in the middle, and we collided like two bullets. As I pushed her shoulders, I forced her back. Though larger, she weighed less than me. I tried smothering her into the ground, but she strained while pushing me back, my feet dragging on the stone. She gripped on my shoulders so hard that my armor bent.

The metal squealed, and a deformed voice lurched, "Is this all the strength you have, weakling?"

I bent down while pulling her up, forcing her off her feet. I grunted while grabbing her shoulders. I slammed her into the ground, and the echo exploded outwards across the cavern. Before she could recover, I picked her up once more and slammed her into the other side of the ground. When I lifted her again, she pushed her feet against me.

Her heels pressed against my neck, prying her from my grip. She shot off me before rolling back onto her feet. I stepped towards her, my feet firm like pillars. Her eyes narrowed before she sprinted away towards a back wall. I smiled at that. She regained some control faster this time.

She ran into the wall but bounced off a barrier of mana. Torix waved a finger at her while staring at the runes, "You won't break what remains of my son's work. Stay in your playground, child."

Althea's monster half screamed at Torix, scrounging at him. I clomped my foot into the ground, throwing a chip of stone at her. It snapped into her face, grabbing her attention again. She peered at my feet, then a low clicking ebbed from her chest. She pounded a fist into the ground, grabbing rock chips and tossing them towards me.

When the rocks smashed into me, they crushed into powder, like bombs of dust. Unlike her bone spears, these left no mark on me, aside from a thick, brown cloud. Smothering me, the dense fog blinded me before she darted forward, fast as a speeding car.



She tackled me. My feet left the ground, and my vision blurred. Her flesh tore as she shapeshifted, and she got over me. Pinning me down, she clawed at my armor with long talons. Flashes of light brimmed from the cloud of dust as the claws scraped across my skin. Like fighting in a thunder soaked cloud, sparks rained from her gouging at my chest with sweeping strikes.

Desperation and panic flooded me. My helm ripped open with jagged teeth of armor. They clamped onto her thigh before I stabbed my hand into the stone. The tips of my gauntlets bent, but they dug several inches into the rock. With my fingernails peeled back in pain, I pulled myself sideways while jerking with my neck. I turned her off of me before scrambling on top of her once more.

I reared back my fist before hammering her face with my fist. Panic gushing in me, I clapped Althea's head against the stone floor with savage, brutal blows. Her legs bent backwards, the tendons within them snapping. Like a human made of gelatin, her lower limbs coiled around my head before she pulled me down.

My head whiplashed against the ground, a hunk of her thigh within my helmet's teeth. Her spine broke backwards as she contorted, eerie and disgusting. Her eyes flashed black now as she grinned with long, sharp canines. She slithered her arms into the slit of my helmet as a deformed voice laughed.

Her arms squeezed into my helmet before covering my face. All of a sudden, I couldn't breath. The panic doubled as the flow of flesh reached my nose. I squirmed and writhed, pulling her off me, but she kept forcing more and more of her arms into my helmet. Pressure built on my nose and mouth. My lungs screamed for air as my struggling turned to a frenzy.

The slit of my armor chomped onto her limbs. She fell backwards, her arms severed. Needles formed inside my armor, mincing the goopy arm she forced into my helmet and nose. My armor indulged itself on the blood, soaking it in. Air rushed into my lungs as I breathed with blood smothering my face. My jaw slackened, and I gazed at the roof.

That terrified me.

Swallowing that fear, I turned towards Althea. She laid with her head against the stone floor, her arms gone. She hissed and gasped as blood retracted back into her wounds, regenerating her with a pace even I couldn't match. Within thirty seconds, her arms returned and she stood once more. She lay there heaving for a few minutes, her monstrous form retracting. She murmured,

"I'm sorry."

My face turned cold, my helmet covering the stony expression. Not trusting her anymore, I stayed silent. She turned herself over, and a frigid silence passed over us. She raised a shaking hand,

"Uhm...What is that armor of yours?"

I stood, pushing my fear and pain down. I spoke with nonchalance,

"It eats monsters. That's probably why it eats you."

She recoiled at my words, each of them landing like the strike of a whip. She frowned, "I wouldn't have done, uhm, whatever that was if I could help it."

I glared at her, "You tried to strangle me with your arms."

She pointed a finger at me, "And you bit them off."

I closed my eyes, remembering the goal of this entire process. Taking a breath, I raised a hand, "Alright, I'll let it go. Back to questioning. Where are you from?"

She stood herself up, "You tell me first."

I raised my brow, "Huh...I'm from this planet."

Althea peered around, "Is this a cave on the planet?"

"No. It's a dungeon. I killed the monsters and boss here."

She blinked at the runes on the walls, "It looks like it was busy."

"Yeah, a little. Now answer my question."

Althea met my eye, "This looks like an old dungeon. I thought this planet was a newly systemized world. It shouldn't have had time for something like this to develop."

I put my hands on my hips, "Every other dungeon wasn't like this. They're like what you're describing. This, well, it's a unique rift. I spawned here."

She raised an eyebrow, her own curiosity peaked, "Oh, really? That must have been hard."

Flashes of Baldag-Ruhl's insects smothering me stormed in my mind. I shut them out while crossing my arms, "Yeah, a little. What about you?"

"I can't remember anything before the lab, like I told you. I've never been to a world this young and green. Normally, even the most tame of forests hold creatures that move like walking mountains. Without a guild behind you, most cities are swallowed whole by those colossi."

My eyes widened, "So you're telling me the monsters...They just keep growing?"

"I think so. The culling is hard, yeah, but being born in an aged world is like being born in a war zone. Education, training, all of that is necessary to even be independent."

"I'm guessing you came from one of these guilds, right?"

Althea's face shook. She nodded, "I...Yeah. I think so. I don't know what else could support...A lab-" A large canine expanded out of the side of her face. She retched out before I closed my eyes. This again. I opened them, and Althea grabbed the sides of her head. She squeezed while straining her face. She murmured,

"Ah...Stop. Not again."

She wrestled with the demons under her skin, the internal struggle like a war waging. A few minutes passed, and the monsters within overwhelmed her. As they did, she growled out,

"Sorry."

I cracked my neck, steeling myself, "No problem. It's good if I let out some steam anyway."

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We fought for several hours before our minds were so exhausted that we just ran into each other. Althea needed rest at some point, and she collapsed midway through one of our bouts. I carried her over towards Torix's table, setting her down there. With nothing else to do, I walked over towards Torix.

The lich turned to me, crossing a robed leg over another, "Ah, I see you've finally exhausted her. I'll assume you're looking for somewhere to rest, perhaps? Such are the limits of a blood and flesh body, after all."

I shook my head, "I want to read some books about mana. I want something basic, if you have it."

Torix leaned back in his mana chair, his eyes flaring green. Shifting back to blue, he gave me a slow nod, "You know, you're not normal."

I furrowed my brow, "What? You're telling me other people aren't interested in magic?"

"Certainly they are, but I'm more specifically referring to the pace you set yourself at. You move from one activity to the next, on and on and on. Admirable, yes, but also destructive. It's almost as if you're running to escape something, perhaps time to think? It could be more productive than you'd first imagine."

I put my fingertips against my temples, "Look, do you have the books or not?"

“Testy, aren’t you? That’s the lack of rest I’ll assume. I have many books on hand, including several classics on the matter. I’ll give you several for safekeeping, though do keep them undamaged. I’ll take any deterioration on the books as a personal slight.” Torix leaned closer, “And I’m certain you understand what that entails, correct?”

His glare piercing, I leaned back, “I do.”

“Good.” Torix whipped some books from his portal, “Here’s a few choice selections you may peruse from. I’d recommend brushing up on your fundamentals before attempting more advanced magic. Many magicians believe they may skip the elementary basics via practicing advanced methods.”

Torix scoffed, “It’s like trying to sprint before you can stand.”

I took a book, the runic glyphs in a different language. Melting in my eyes, the language molded into a visual of English. I pushed the book back, gaping at it, “What the hell? It changed shape?”

“Ah, your first book in a different language then? Schema has quite an advanced language algorithm at its disposal. Rely on it, and it shall save you more than a mere inkling of time.”

I turned to Torix, glad he kept giving me advice, “Thanks for the tips. And sorry for being snappy earlier. I’m just a bit on edge after the fights with Althea. Do you have any other tidbits on how to follow magic?”

“Certainly. Be prepared for advanced incantations and grafted series of thoughts. Coordinating those attempts will be the primary driver for converting your mind’s power into actual sorcery. That, and *reading*.”

He waved me off. A bit confused yet excited nonetheless, I waved goodbye while stepping away. Peering at the ancient tome, its title read *The Makings of Mastery*. I opened the pages, beginning my journey into magical wonder. Turns out, magical reading was *dry*. Like, *real dry*. Within a few minutes of peering at its contents, my eyes glazed over.

The exciting pieces of magic stayed dormant, lying under a grim, expository surface. Taking the forefront, the canonical knowledge and philosophical preamble rambled on for over a hundred pages. Torix scribbled dozens of notes and thoughts on the margins too, the wizard having parsed the contents of this book long ago.

Finding no end to his notes, the lich’s mind relished in details where mine did not. Still, I kept my head down and trudged through. The book mentioned bits about mana and its nature. The primary focus dwelled on the conversion of mental energy into the physical. I took time here or there to exercise what the book explained, but the contents never worked out.

I met a wall when trying the book’s methods on myself. Esoteric and enigmatic, the book’s explanation of magic reminded me of using rocket science on a slingshot. Sure, you could

calculate and analyze the trajectory of it all, but what was the point? Summoning a stream of red from my palm, it burned my hand. Closing my eyes, I felt out how mana flowed.

It was a sacrifice for me, one where I did the opposite of what the book described. It mentioned thoughts converting into mana, but I converted my actual body and blood into energy. Blood Magic explained all that. Torix lacked any books for Blood Magic, so I was on my own there. Despite the impracticalities, the book nested interesting tidbits in its haze of drudgery.

It examined the eldritchian mana, for instance. Ambient mana infected and contorted the will of the user, more like a hungry parasite than a fuel source. It carried an amalgamation of different minds, a primordial thought soup. This thought soup held chaotic properties, ones that few could master.

Peering at Althea sleeping on the table, that explained her lack of control. She struggled with dozens of different voices and motivations pulling her mind apart all the time. Her transformations stemmed from the eldritch energies' untempered effects as well. They gave cause for her reformations.

Even with several hours of reading, the text never gave a source for Althea's piercing, however. It was a mystery for another day, and the book detailed several historical mages that advanced the field of eldritch magic. They faced heretical accusations from Schema, and each one of them ended up isolated and alone.

And in time, none of them survived the effects of the magic.

They all died horrific deaths at the hands of their own experiments, oftentimes fates worse than death. A few even evolved into advanced level bosses. As I read these books and applied the knowledge to my own stream spell, I collected a few other skills. Mana Theory, Reading Comprehension, and Blood Magic Manipulation.

Finishing my reading, I found Althea stirring from her rest. She pulled herself up, and once cognizant, she panicked about her lack of armor once more. Memories of yesterday surfaced before she peered forward. Her head twitched, but she kept herself together. A claw expanded from one of her hands, but she willed it back under her skin.

Her face turned like steel, and she resolved herself. In that mindset, she stayed in control for ten full minutes, a new record. She succumbed once more, and I handled the situation by literally beating sense into her. The fights still dragged on, and I got used to her monstrous form and abilities.

At this point, I considered the bouts as spars, and I practiced against her. My fighting style honed down as minutes of fighting dragged on into hours. Althea's focus unfolded, and she turned into a motivated machine. She wanted her monstrous half tamed, and she kept

hammering away at it each time she regained control. It made our fights less terrifying as a whole.

Althea and I repeated this cycle of battle several times until she fell asleep against a mana barrier. Placing her back on the runic table, I stopped myself from staring at her before walking up to Torix. I turned a hand to him,

"Mind talking for a minute? I'm sure a break from staring at the wall would help."

Torix stared up at the ceiling, "Schema forbid it, I can only hope that is the case. What is it you wish to discuss?"

"Uhm, I just wanted to know more about the system and Schema. So like, why are dungeon cores so valuable? I mean, there's only so many perks that you can get. I don't understand why they're so heavily sought after."

Torix spread his arms, "It's all a matter of circumstance and context. You've likely not hit this point already, but there are perks for every time you hit level one hundred with an attribute. Obviously, by the time most people reach that cusp of power, they've filled out their leveling perks. They won't need the core's perk points because of that."

Torix put his fingertips together, "This is where the second utility of dungeon hearts comes into play. You see, perk points can be exchanged for attribute points. Dungeon cores grant perk points, and that gives attribute points when you have no more perks to allocate. Now, there are limits to this conversion. You may only absorb 1/4th your total level regarding core points."

I raised a palm to Torix, "Ok...So let me just, uhm...Can I get an example?"

Torix created a visual example with magic, tiny streaks of dark mana serving as guides, "After you've unlocked all your perks, every ten levels will give you twelve attribute points. 20% more, in other words. Dungeon cores give another flat 25% more core points, for a total of 45% more total attribute points."

I stared up, doing some mental math. I waved my hands, "So, if I wanted to know someone's total attributes, I just take one and a half of their level total?"

Torix shrugged, "That is a suitable estimate. Remember that trees influence one's attributes immensely. Regardless, this conversion makes dungeon cores hold innate value. This is further inflated due to the presence of fringe worlds."

A haunting suspicion leaked into my mind. I remembered Althea mentioning how the eldritch never stopped growing. Torix's fire eyes narrowed while saying,

"Fringe worlds are planets at the very cusp of being overwhelmed by the eldritch. These worlds are often kept afloat by battle hungry heathens in need of a challenge. The natives of planets

like this have no way of killing the creatures on their planets. They are born into a world with a hopelessly low level. So low, in fact, that they can't even leave the planet. They face extinction."

Torix whirled a hand around, "Anyone offering lower level creatures are a high value commodity in those places. Of course, you've seen that it takes well over level one hundred to fill out your perks. Even necromancers such as I cannot maintain summons of that level on a consistent basis. The cost benefit analysis simply doesn't add up."

Torix gestured a hand to me, "And as you've seen, being level one hundred doesn't make you strong by any galactic metric. Leaving your new planet is an easy way of getting yourself slaughtered by roaming eldritch or criminals."

I grimaced, "Yeah. It sounds like a lose-lose situation."

Torix nodded, "Aptly put. Now, imagine a normal person who's below the leveling curve. They'd be even worse off than you. They'll see a stockpile of perks, but they lack the perk points to obtain them. Cores come into play for those individuals."

I nodded, "The orbs are pretty much 5 levels for people on those worlds. That's harsh."

"Precisely. As you've no doubt noticed, Schema's way of doing things can be unforgiving. Speaking of unforgiving, how much energy have you gained from your conduit with Althea?"

I glanced at my menu screen, finding around a hundred thousand ambient mana absorbed. Notable, but by no means a ridiculous amount. I showed Torix that particular menu. After reading it, the ancient lich turned towards the wall once more,

"It shall take a few weeks before your armor transforms once more. That is an attainable goal as I parse through these runes."

"I'll get it done." Staring down, I remembered my friends and the chaos outside this cavern. I reached out a hand, "Torix, do you have any idea when you'll be satisfied with this ritual? I need to find my people, and it doesn't look like you're going to be finished anytime soon."

Torix turned in his dark chair, steepling his fingers, "Hm, that's something that's rather trying. I've gained no ground on the runes, and the actual ritual itself, from what you've described, is immensely dangerous. A split in dimensions? I've no means of controlling the releasing energies. It will destroy this dungeon and everything within it."

Torix's eyes flared, "It's rather unfortunate, but I don't know any method of controlling those volatile forces."

I leaned down, biting my lip. At this rate, it'd be months before I found Michael or Kelsey, and with every passing moment, their chance of dying increased. Staying BloodHollow that long while the world devolved didn't exactly suit me either. I dragged my hands down my face,

"Dammit."

Torix stood upright, interlocking his hands behind himself, "I'm sorry, child, but I'm doing what I can. There are limits to even my magic. I can't control that energy."

Remembering my armor and how it absorbed Althea's mana, I stood upright. I pointed at my chest, "But, maybe I can."