

32 What Friends Can Be

Michael's eyes widened, "Wait a minute...Daniel. The actual Daniel Hillside?"

I dragged my hand down my face, "Who else has my terrible last name? Huh?"

Michael leaned back, "Your dad, I guess."

I peeked my head over the hill, "Point is, I don't want to get shot at. Can you put the rifle away?"

Michael held it tight before his eyes narrowed, "Ok...I'll do it, but I'm not putting it too far from me. It's been dangerous lately." Michael set the gun down onto the side of the house, "There. Happy?"

I shouted, "Yes. One last thing Michael, I look totally different, so, you know, be ready for that."

Michael rolled his eyes, "Bro, you've always been ugly. A few scars and a scrape or two isn't going to change that."

Althea's eyes narrowed, "Wow. He's supposed to be your friend?"

I waved her concern off, "He just knows me." I yelled, "I'm coming out." I stood up, and jogged down the hill. As I came into Michael's view, I spread my arms wide with my helmet pulled off, "It's good to see you."

Michael's face wrinkled up in disgust while he raised arms. He almost peered away while jeering, "Gah, what in the hell happened to you?"

I let my arms flop against my sides, "I wasn't expecting that kind of a reaction...Do I look that bad?"

Michael winced, "Kind of. You got metal all over you, but it doesn't look like platemail. I-Is that a disease or something? Did a monster get you?"

I sighed, "Technically, yes, but oh man, it's a long story. There's so much to tell you and Kelsey."

Michael gave me a sidelong look, "Yeah. Same here...But just so you know, if you're looking for a handout like usual, you're not getting one. We don't have food to spare."

Not expecting a verbal jab, I rolled with the punches. I spread out my hands, "Come on man, I found you guys despite the literal apocalypse. I'm not exactly struggling for food."

Michael took a step towards his gun, "How did you find us anyway?"

His standoff approach to me set off alarm bells, but I kept it together. I planned out an excuse before coming here, so I turned a palm to him and said, "I talked to some people in town. They mentioned you guys being here. It sucks what happened to Kelsey's house, by the way."

Michael's eyes widened before his shoulders slumped. His face contorted before he took a breath. He looked exhausted as he put his hands on his hips, "Ok...That's good enough for me. We'll talk out here. I don't think my family's going to want to let you inside either way."

My left eye twitched, "Why not? Am I that scary to look at?"

Michael rolled his eyes, "Dude, yes. Besides that, I still don't know if you are who you say you are. It isn't like I can't see your status."

Panic surged in me for a second as I recalled what Stacy and David's appraisal mentioned about me. I waved my hands, "Hey man, if you need more proof, I got proof. Your family enjoys camping. You've taken me to Prier's Creek, the Evergreen Ravine, and Red Mountain. We've never been to Mt. Verner, at least I haven't been."

I counted on my fingers, "Your friends with Kelsey and me. You got grades like mine, in the C's. You liked Kelsey when we were younger-"

Michael raised his hands, his face blushing, "Ok, ok, shut the hell up. Damn dude."

I grinned, "See, it's me."

Michael shook his head, "Ok, it's you, but let's still talk out by the garage. It's less intrusive there. Some people are still...you know, jumpy after the tutorial."

I frowned but accepted the reasoning. Michael opened the screen door, "I'll get Kelsey. Wait here."

I gave him a thumbs up as he left. When he shouldered his rifle, a chill ran up my spine. I shook off that feeling as he went into the house. Michael hadn't shot me. Some random dude did. After taking a breath, a notification popped up in my vision.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - Friend request received. Y/N?

I tilted my head at the message before selecting yes. Althea gained an enormous amount of levels from those summons of Yawm. It made her worries about safety last night sound absurd. Either way, I intended on catching up to her soon. Another system notice cropped up.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - That guy's a jerk.

I replied with just a thought.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - What? No he's not.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - Why'd he mention the handout thing then? Or not letting you in the house?

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - The handout thing was because they used to do a lot for me. Kelsey's family chipped in here or there, and Michael's

did too. They probably thought I needed help, so they're trying to look after their own right now. The house thing, er, I don't know what to say. Maybe he's scared I'll break something?

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - If you ask me, he's giving off some bad vibes.

I stared down at my status, frowning at her message. I shook my head.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - It's going to be fine. I've just changed a lot, and they're struggling right now. They'll warm up in a bit. You'll see.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - If...If you say so.

After waiting outside for a few minutes, Michael opened the garage door. I stayed a couple feet away from the garage entrance, finding Kelsey behind him. Her red hair frazzled into curly tangles, and freckles dotted her face like they always had. Like Michael, Kelsey thinned down some, but the transition weighed on more.

Her skin paled since the system started, eyebags forming on her face. Clumps of dirt and bits of food embedded into her shirt, and I worried about that. Kelsey always kept her clothes and person in pristine condition. She enjoyed girly stuff, to my and Michael's chagrin at times. The worst sign showed from her bloodshot eyes. She'd been crying. Concern spread over me, and I stepped over to her.

Michael raised a palm as I did, so I stopped. Awkward silence passed over us, and Kelsey stared off at nothing. Breaking the ice, I spread my hands, "Yo, Kelsey. What's up?"

She murmured, "Nothing."

I leaned back, "Y-you look a little worn down."

She blinked in slow motion before mouthing, "I'm *adjusting*."

Her tone carried a deep edge of hurt in it. Michael kept his eyes on her, his stare intense. Michael's emotions coursed over his face in waves. One second, pain roared over his face like he lost someone near and dear to him. In another second, Michael's fatigue overwhelmed him, and his expression numbed, all passion leaving him.

They were in a sorrier state than I'd thought they'd be. Kelsey peered up, her eyes hollow, "What happened to you?"

I shook my head, "I got armor now. What happened to you guys?"

I tilted my head, trying to get a better look at her. Kelsey cringed back, and Michael held a hand out, "Come on man, stop staring."

I stepped into the garage, "Sorry man, it's just obvious something bad happen-"

Kelsey hissed, "Don't get any closer."

At this point, their attitude pissed me off. I turned my hands to them, "What? Are you guys scared of me? Or am I just that disgusting?"

Michael frowned, "I'm not scared of you man. I...I just don't know how to handle the situation right now. Kelsey...She's been through a lot, and I don't think she can take anymore right now."

I put a hand on my chest, "Ok, but what do I have to do with that?"

Kelsey grimaced, "Everything."

Peering at a hollowed out shell of Kelsey, her demeanor distressing, to say the least. I cut her some slack before I spread out my hands, "Kelsey, I'm sorry you lost your home, but you've got someone to stay with, you know? It could be worse."

She simmered, "I doubt that."

Taken aback, I gawked at her. Kelsey acted like the life of the party in most situations, the certified firestarter of our little group. Her throwing a bunch of cold water over everyone wasn't like her at all. In fact, a cloud of gloom smothered her and everything around her. Kelsey churned out her next words,

"So...Where have you been all this time? Three mystery marks, huh? You must have been out 'leveling' up?"

I facepalmed. That's what this was. They thought I abandoned them. I smiled while spreading both my hands, "Oh, so that's what this is all about. I can explain. You know how I was out there caving with Michael before the system started?"

Kelsey gnarled out, "Yeah. We already know about it."

Michael winced as she spoke. He put a hand over her shoulders, and he whispered, "Kelsey, just calm down."

Something simmered right under Kelsey's uncomposed surface. She bordered on flaring at any moment like a grenade with its pin pulled. I raised my palms to her, and I said,

"So when the system started, I didn't spawn in some tutorial. I was stuck in a dungeon called BloodHollow for the first few weeks."

Kelsey tilted her head, "And you expect us to believe that? No one else spawned in a dungeon. Why did you?"

I tapped my chest plate, a seedling of anger spawning in my chest, "Kelsey. Look at me. Do you think I just had this happen at random? I can't take this off."

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah, ok. Sure."

I stood up straight, "Here's proof."

I let the armor slide over my face and then back again. The metal coursed onto my back again while I tilted my head, "There you go. This is just a part of me now, and I'm dealing with it, kind of like how you guys are dealing with the system changes like me. Now look, I know you're both struggling, but that doesn't mean you have the right to just tear into me before I even have time to explain myself."

She pointed at me and shouted, "What is there to explain? You were gone when we needed you, and now you show up after everything's settled down. Everybody died while you were off killing monsters."

Michael put a hand over his face, "Oh god, Kelsey. Don't-"

Kelsey shoved him before she threw her hands out at me. She howled, "Now you just want our damn help like always. That's all you ever did was ask for help."

I narrowed my eyes, my anger turning cold, "I never asked for anything because I did just fine back then. In fact, I'm doing just fine right now. You know, besides getting screamed at for no apparent reason."

She let her hands flop on her sides, "Yeah, that's just great for you then. I'm so glad you're doing well."

I turned to Michael before saying, "Why is she throwing a tantrum like this?"

Kelsey stammered, "Tantrum... *Tantrum*? They're all dead. All of them."

I raised a brow, "What do you mean everyone?"

She snarled, "My family. Who else?"

A rush of thoughts poured into my mind. A dousing of empathy oozed in, but more than anything, a coldness permeated my mind. I already lost my father from the system and my mother before that, so maybe that's why pity didn't overcome me. I frowned at her, my composure remaining firm,

"I lost my dad too. It's been hard for everyone."

Kelsey's face flushed, "And what else did you expect? It's not like you ever had a real family in the first place."

A primeval rage seethed in my chest. In my head, this entire situation played out with smiles and hugs. I expected soft laughs and hard stories. I wanted someone to share my journey with, someone who knew me before the system started. Instead of being able to take a load off and relax, the situation turned into a spiral of emotions. At this point, Kelsey unhinged at the seams, and Michael let her wallow around and wail into me.

But even if I blamed Kelsey's words on her situation, her words carried a cutting, premeditated edge. The family remark, in particular, held an acidic hate. It was less a response and more an attempt to hurt me. It was like this entire time, she stewed with that in her head. Now, the boiling overflow

poured right over my head. That kind of statement would've left me reeling in most situations, but a part of me cut myself off after hearing it.

That piece of my mind rushed in as a frigid wave. It made an ice wall that guarded me from whatever they had to say. Parts of Michael and Kelsey's words still seeped in. The worst part was how all of this sounded like old sentiments, ones they both believed but never bothered sharing. It made me ponder our relationship before this moment.

Did my friends always think of me like some beaten puppy, begging for food? Kelsey even made it out like I let her family die. Those accusations didn't go unnoticed. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. My mental whiplash mounted from good expectations for this meeting as well. My anticipation contrasted a grim reality, one where I awaited coffee and found a cup of squirming roaches instead.

I closed my eyes, pushing down a wave of insults. I shook my head, "Kelsey. I know you're in pain right now, but don't talk to me like that. Don't you ever."

Her anger doused out in a wave. Panic cropped up over her eyes, and she looked up at Michael. The guy looked back and forth between us before he scowled at me. He pointed, "Dude, what the hell's wrong with you?"

I pinched the brow of my nose, "Did you not hear what she just said now? She crossed a line."

Michael pulled her close, "Yeah, but that doesn't mean you get to make death threats at her."

Searching for answers to their insanity, I peered at them both. Searching for an answer, I inspected their status and found one.

Kelsey Lanier | Level 6 - Kelsey is a member of Springfield who specialized in music and scrapbooking before Schema's arrival.

Michael Johnson | Level 20 - Michael is a member of Springfield who specialized in outdoor activities and drawing before Schema's system. His skills in rifle handling enabled him a respectable output of dungeon clearing, so wariness regarding his gunfire should be taken into account.

My jaw slackened at their statuses. Their levels paled in comparison with my own. My hands dropped to my sides,

"You guys have a low level and all, but me not wanting to get treated like garbage has turned into a death threat now? *Really?*"

Michael waved a hand, "Look, the point is, don't talk to her like that."

My eyes narrowed at him, "So she just gets to say whatever she wants to me, but I can't even defend myself?"

Michael glared back, "Dude, she's been through a lot."

Losing control, I shouted, "So have I, but I'm not being given any kind slack here. It's like you set this up so that you can just both say whatever the hell you want to, and it's pissing me off."

As if truly aware of our level gap for the first time, Michael put his hand on his gun. It wasn't a conscious arming; he did it without thinking. Fear made him do it. Not wanting this situation to head in that direction, I stepped back, giving them space. I peered away,

"This isn't going like how I thought it would. I thought we'd just talk like we used to. I thought this would be fun."

Kelsey peered at the ground, and she seethed, "Yeah...Well a lot has changed."

I winced before reaching out to them, "Yeah, but I didn't think we had. I mean, I haven't been able to talk to anybody. Look at me. I got shot on the day I left BloodHollow, a dark pit where I was stuck for *weeks*. I had to fight to survive for so long. I was alone, and I was afraid."

My throat burned as I pointed at them both, "I come back here, and you two act like I left you both behind, like I should've done more. Do you know how that makes me feel? It's like I'm worthless, like my best isn't good enough."

I poured my soul out, and a tense silence passed over us. For a second, I thought I got to them. I thought they let all this animosity go and we could reset. Kelsey fumed,

"Maybe you feel bad because you should."

The attacks mounted, and my eyes watered. I furrowed my brow, "What? How was I supposed to help you guys? I couldn't find you. You went to some cousin's house I've never heard of. You didn't leave a message where I could find you. Oh, I could understand this kind of a reaction if I ignored you guys or something, but that's not what happened here. If anything, you guys have no idea what it took to find you. *None*."

Michael peered down, "Yeah...but that doesn't change how it feels to us."

I closed my eyes, rage spiralling in my chest. I didn't have to fight for them. Besides that, they never mentioned me owing them for all those 'favors' in the first place. I'd have never taken anything from them if they let me know they'd hold it over my head like that. Peering at them, I almost laughed at the irony of the situation.

They called me a roach while asking for protection. They acted like I was a beggar, but they asked for help in the same breath.

Rage mounted, my breathing strained. Kelsey and Michael both took steps towards the door, as if the thin panel of wood could stop me. It would never. They'd melt to jelly in Oppression if I wanted them dead. Silencing those thoughts, I took a few breaths, hard and heavy. Staring at them, I

realized how soft the two of them were. They stood with bones of gelatin and flesh like liquid. They could pop any second, and they blamed that weakness on me.

I wouldn't let them.

I pointed a finger at them, "Go ahead and blame me for what's happened to you, but know that I'm not why you're both so feeble. Now you're turning your weakness into a weapon, as if your softness is your strength. It's not. It's why you're suffering. I'm not letting you throw that on me. That's all on you. Both of you."

Kelsey glowered, "Yeah. Sure."

I stepped away, my emotions numbing. I stated, "I don't have to sit here and listen to two kids blame me for their problems...I'll see you when I see you."

I kept walking away, and they said nothing. I expected them to pull me back, to apologize, or maybe hug me from behind. They did nothing, letting me go. By the time I reached Althea, my hands and feet prickled like I dipped them in needles. My heart thundered in my chest from a rush of adrenaline. That turned into a battle, one I struggled more with than most real fights.

I stepped beside Althea and behind the hill. Althea stared at the ground, grabbing her elbow with a hand, "...I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

I rolled my shoulders, "Life isn't fair. Let's go."

Concern spread over her face as we ran away from their home. Torix's deathknight, a monster I lost track of a while back, already shuttled itself back to Torix. Althea and I left in a random direction, my brain working as if sludge ran through it instead of blood. After about fifteen minutes, Althea and I stood in a patch of abandoned woods. I quit walking, leaning up against a tree. The wicked numbness faded, and a vicious, violent burst of anger roared out in place of it.

I smashed my hand into the tree three times. My knuckles crushed through the bark and wood. Chunks of the trunk pulped away from the poor pine, and sap covered my hands. I grabbed both sides of the trunk, squeezing through the bark before kicking it one last time. Several inches into the wood, my foot stuck into the mass. I jerked my leg out of it while turning my back to the tree. The spike of rage dissipated as quickly as it came.

I let myself drag down the trunk. My head flopped forward while grabbing the sides of my head. My throat burned, and I laughed,

"Hah. You were right. Michael is a jerk. I mean, you have to be happy about that, huh?"

Althea walked over. She shook her head, "I'm not. Not at all."

I stared forward, "I guess I should thank you for the warning. I can't imagine doing that without one."

She walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder, "You didn't deserve that."

My eyes watering as I fumbled my words, "Did you hear them? I mean, that went worse than I could've ever imagined. I have to admit, Torix was right. Him coming would've been a bad idea. A terrible one. It would've made that even worse than it was. Hah. Hah."

Something about the situation made me laugh, a painful, cynical sort of chuckle. Althea winced in pain at the sight of me, and she nodded,

"Yeah...I'm sorry it happened."

I took a shaky breath, letting my hands flop on my sides, "So yeah...Those were my friends. I hope you liked them."

Althea peered down, unable to meet my gaze. My breathing turned ragged before I covered my face. I leaned over, tears falling off my nose and chin. I snapped, "Just go."

Althea frowned, "No."

I gritted my teeth before growling, "I said go."

She closed her eyes, wincing at my words. She kept her hand on my shoulder and stated,

"No."

I howled out, "I said leave."

She kept her eyes away from me, but her hand never left my shoulder. Her voice was like stone,

"I'm not leaving."

And by my side, she remained. I blinked a few times before breaking down. I turned away, wallowing in self pity. I took jagged breaths and my hands shook. My eyes burned and my body writhed. Tears coursed. Snot ran down my nose. It was ugly and raw and real. At first, those emotions came in a flood. They roared out, a thunderous, bleating might that ripped me to shreds. Minutes passed. Scorching breaths became burning lungs. My eyes quit watering, and the wave of emotion devolved into a trickle.

Like a scorching flame, the sadness left me, and I lingered as a pile of ash. Sitting there, my mind wandered. Michael and Kelsey experienced some life changing events since the system started, just as I had. I predicted that, but blaming me for everything? Oof. That caught me off guard. Even after trying to open up, they just stabbed me in the ribs. From someone else, I would've shrugged it off. From those two, their words split my chest with fire.

Those emotions raged, but in time, they passed. As always, I remained. After my pity party, I wiped my face and blew my nose on a leaf. I stood up, Althea having waited with me the entire time. I turned to her, "I...Thanks for that...And, er, I'm sorry you had to see me like this. And for telling you to leave. And just being a general jerk. Gah, I'm awful."

Althea peered off, a bit embarrassed, "It's ok...It happens to the best of us. And, uhm, don't worry about it. You helped me get my senses back. No one else has ever done anything like that for me. This is the...It's the least I can do. Heh, this is the only thing I can do."

I smiled, "Well, know that it's plenty. A lot more than my *friends* ever did for me." I turned away, peering off into the distance, "But, yeah...I've got to reassess. This didn't go like I wanted it to. I have no idea what I'm going to do now. Maybe Torix has answers."

We got over a cliff, getting a view of Springfield. The yellowed trees near the city's center ebbed and swayed in the wind, an eerie howl echoing over the small town. Althea grimaced at it,

"Yeah. We may all have to reassess soon."

33 Touching Base

We ran through the tall timbers, etching a path of our own as we did. As we headed back, my mind raced through different trains of thought. One mental track accepted Michael and Kelsey's accusations, but I silenced that dark voice in the back of my head. I already saved two people from BloodHollow, proving Michael and Kelsey wrong before I even left my first dungeon.

That wasn't to say I was a saint, but I wasn't evil either. A cursory glance showed those two were in denial. The notion dismissed, another vein of thought dwelled in my psyche: Springfield's situation. Althea's words resonated with my own ideas because the Yawm guy sounded like bad news. Even as we passed the woods, the evil overlord's summons dashed through the trees anytime we closed in on the town.

The sheer enormity of our enemy's presence intimidated me, but other worries added up as well. Even while passing by, we found people fought more against starvation than the eldritch. My 'friends' were a great example of that. Kelsey looked like a vampire stole her soul out of her chest while hunger squeezed Michael's whole body dry, shriveling him to his roots. Not everyone got free rations from an undying lich, but regardless of the situation, the eldritch wouldn't wait for us to get situated.

The dungeon monsters strengthened everyday, and even while running through forest, I found a few strange, hulking beasts littering the woods. They waited for prey, though Althea and I weren't on the menu. We tore them apart while passing by Springfield. As we did, the empty buildings whistled from the wind. Shattered windows let in the cool air. The early autumn spread further by the day, the town's center cast in a haunting beauty amidst the early morning sun.

Echoes in the distance reminded me of people screaming, the abandoned buildings sending chills up my spine. I intended on inspecting that place after getting my thoughts together. For now, I needed some time to myself. Althea and I arrived at the abandoned quarry in an hour. Torix labored in the light, his mind always active. Kessiah napped in her white forcefield, her mind the opposite.

Kessiah's stayed in her blank energy ball, hovering over a marble slab. We raced past her before Torix turned to us. His eyes flared for a second before the lich coughed into a hand. He spoke as if walking on stilts,

"Ahem...It is quite good to see that...that the two of you are back. I hope all was well when meeting with...Your friends."

Shame burned in my chest, and I peered off, "Huh...Yeah. It went well. You know, it was good. Great. Yup."

Torix gave me a knowing look. I scratched the back of my head, "...I don't want to talk about it."

My fingertips met hair instead of steel. Staring at my hand, my helmet slid back over my face without me thinking about it. Moving my hand back up, my helmet peeled back through reflex alone. I grinned at that as Torix turned back to his runes. He took a breath,

"Then I shan't speak of it."

A quiet surged over the entire expanse, and I let them know I was heading out. Althea and Torix had plenty to do, each of them studying something or the other. Passing the forest and trees, my day wasted away before my eyes, my mind drifting off as I piddled all the while. Unfocused and distant, I went to bed early that day, finding no need for a bed. Waking back up, I walked around aimlessly for the second day in the row.

Along the outskirts of Springfield, my mind paced about on its own. The conversation with Michael and Kelsey kept spinning in my head. At this point, I didn't regret shouting at them. If anything, I wished I said more. I hoped they both regretted what they said to me, but that hope was grounded in naivete. Michael and Kelsey said what they meant. In the end, they felt entitled to my help, something I couldn't give at the time.

For that, they lashed out with all their fury.

They happened to be in a position to wound me, but spinning my wheels over that only wasted my time. Frowning at myself, so did daydreaming. After two days of wallowing about, I stayed at the camp. I gave myself a few light slaps, wanting to get back to doing something. Anything, really. Getting started, I hopped down the quarry's edges, finding Althea and Kessiah chatting while Torix worked.

The necromancer moved onto a different slab of marble. He already carved out several patches of runes, his work quick and efficient. Althea set up a table of inspection work for her cannon, even having paper and pens set up for diagrams. Kessiah lazed about, doing nothing but trying to distract Althea. Althea didn't mind, so they talked about whatever and whenever. Nearing them, I put my hands on my hips, "What are you two talking about?"

Althea turned to me, "Oh, Daniel, you wouldn't believe what Kessiah's done. Her stories are incredible."

Kessiah peered at her nails, "Psh, those were nothing. I've got way better tall tales to tell than that." Kessiah met my eye, "Want to hear some, little man?"

I clapped once, "Actually, I got a new skill I wanted to test out." I cracked my knuckles, "Mind sparring, Kessiah?"

Kessiah raised a brow, "Wow, you want to get torn apart again *already*?"

I frowned, "If that's what it takes, then yeah. I do."

Kessiah bounced up onto her feet, "It's your funeral. What's the new toy called anyway?"

I raised a brow, "Toy?"

Kessiah frowned, "You know, your new skill. I'm guessing it's a unique one since you're so up in arms about it."

I raised a hand, "No, it's a mythical tier. It's called A Boundless Storm."

She sneered, "A Boundless Storm, huh? You? Heh, that's funny. It's good you got jokes."

I raised my brow, "Believe what you want. It's how I finished this tree I had."

Torix's fire eyes brightened as Kessiah leaned towards me. Kessiah frowned, "Wait...It's a mythical skill? You're serious?"

I opened my skill menu, showing her the skill's description. Kessiah put an arm over my shoulders, leaning against me, "Hah. Wow. I'll admit it. I'm actually a little impressed." She raised out her hand, a minute distance between her two fingers, "Emphasis on little."

I grumbled, "Please stop crushing me."

Kessiah pulled herself up, "Ah, whoops. Sorry about that. I forget your level sometimes. It's *low*."

Considering how lazy she was, I'd catch her sooner rather than later. Once that happened, I'd let her have a piece of my mind. For now, I waited.

Torix raised a hand, entering the conversation, "Allow me to offer you and Althea some perspective. For most, it is truly difficult to develop a mythical skill. They are exceptionally powerful. To make my point, the method I use for summoning and controlling Moloth uses a mythical tiered skill. The enhanced hardness and strength of Kessiah is, in fact, a mythical skill as well."

Althea murmured, "Oh...Heh, I don't have one. All I have is a few unique skills...They're ok, I guess."

Torix swiped a hand while turning to us, "Indeed, that's all you should have. Gaining a mythical skill so early...To be blunt, it's quite unlikely. In Daniel's case, even more so. He's ahead of the curve from a net power perspective. Most people at your development aim on amassing levels. It happens to be more reliable than honing skills tends to be."

I raised an eyebrow, "You seem impressed about the skill, but what about my armor?"

Torix tilted his head, "What of it?"

I gestured to myself, "I didn't get that kind of reaction to *this*, but it's more unique considering you and Kessiah both have mythical skills. They're more common."

Torix turned a palm while giving me a sidelong look, "True, but at the same time, you didn't create your armor. You are merely the benefactor of it. This mythical skill was produced via your own efforts, and that makes all the difference in how it is perceived by yours truly."

Kessiah propped her weight onto a hip, "Yeah, yeah, enough philosophy and back to skills. Think about them like this. Skills give you the ability to do something without thinking. It's like muscle memory. Even walking requires moving a bunch of muscles together at once. Skills are the same, and that's why you can handle several skills at once while training."

Torix added, "A unique skill is like tying a bunch of skills together. You may use several of them in conjunction as well. In essence, your skill gains prove you aren't just mindlessly battling. Your mind is genuinely engaged in the activity. It's a promising sign."

Kessiah shook her head, "You wouldn't believe how many people neglect their skills. Yeah, sure, maybe the numbers aren't as obvious as levels, but they add up. It might be because most people in Schema's system rely on magic or firearms. Range this. Range that. Range, range, range. Melee fighters like us? Oh, we're more than just rare. We're like collector items."

I cupped my chin in my hand, raising my brow a few times, "So that puts me out there as unique, in a way."

Torix shook his head, "Yes, though not in a good way. Melee combatants are often looked down upon until they've amassed a certain reputation. You lack said repute."

I snapped my fingers, "Oh, Torix, can you make me a mirror? After my friend's reacted to me, I'm curious what I look like."

Kessiah scoffed, "Hah. Ugly."

I put a hand on my chest, "Oh, so kind of like you?"

Kessiah raised her brow, "Huh. Look at mister witty over here."

Torix snapped his fingers before water vapor condensed into a thin sheet of ice in front of me. Torix gestured at it,

"Try not to indulge your vanity for too long."

I squinted at the mirror, "It's not vanity. Trust me on that."

I glanced at the mirror, and I gawked at my changes. Hard hands led up to hard arms that ended in a hard face. I peered at myself like moving stone. Scars traced any exposed skin, most of them small and shrinking. My eyes pierced with more focus and clarity than I remembered having. My ragged, dark hair covered some of my now grayish skin, and a more angular face peered back at me.

Like Michael, I lost weight, but my constitution perks stopped me from looking thin. The armor itself crossed over me with spikes and rivets, more menacing than I expected. I looked like an ashen warrior. Isolating my face, I bordered on handsome in some respects, but that could just be wishful thinking. When I pulled my armor back onto my face, the metal warped without squealing. Long, jagged horns jutted from the top of it. Spikes crawled up from my neck. For one last look, I lifted my hands.

The armor clinked around my joints to perfection, appearing as smooth as they felt. The singular red slit on my helmet glowed an ominous crimson as I stood there. It shone on the mirror with red. Despite the sanguine filter, it changed no part of my vision. When the armor's smile cracked across my helm, I leaned back from the mirror in horror. If I saw this, I'd think I was a monster too.

Kessiah's face came into the mirror's view while she leaned onto my shoulder, "Alright, let's see what your new skill can do. I'm done waiting."

Kessiah and I walked outside of the quarry towards the nearby forest. We left since Torix set up shop inside the quarry's base. The lich estimated a two week deadline before Kessiah could leave. We'd touch base on Yawm after that. Kessiah and I passed tall spires of wood with the forest floor covered in shade. Little spots of light leaked through the canopy. Pinecones and pine straw crushed underfoot as we walked into a dense cluster of trees.

Kessiah looked up at the plants, "It's good your planet has this kind of environment. It matches a fringe world, actually. The forests are spires of man eating tentacles instead of trees, though." She peered down, "And there's teeth all over the ground. Eh, those are just details anyways. It's pretty much the same if you think about it."

I cracked my neck before rolling my shoulders. Mocking me, Kessiah did the same, her joints popping out before she let out a yelp. I laughed before slamming my gauntlets together. They echoed a satisfying clunk as I grinned. Adrenaline built in my veins as the anticipation of a good fight deluged me. Needing an outlet, I waited for her as if waiting for Christmas morning.

Kessiah grinned, flashing sharp teeth, "Ready?"

I covered my face in armor, "Always."

She dashed towards me, weaving between the trees. Chunks of earth flew out from behind her steps, roots tearing under her feet. When I charged towards her, I slid between the trees as well. When we met in the middle, Kessiah kicked towards my feet. With a stroke of ingenuity, I jumped up and kicked off a tree beside, my other foot kicking towards her.

My foot collided into Kessiah's face. The tree kicked off splintered and shook as Kessiah stumbled by me, her momentum pulling her further along. She gave me a nod,

"Hah...That's new."

Kessiah charged again before I shot out a stiff, left jab towards her nose. She ducked underneath it, but I had already stepped forward. I kicked off the ground, my knee whipping straight into her face as I brought my elbow down onto the back of her head. Like a guillotine, my elbow and knee smashed into the sides of her face.

Ignoring my simultaneous strikes, Kessiah shot a vicious right hook towards my body, but I pulled my stomach back just enough so that her blow skidded across my armor. Using the rebound off kneeling her, I plopped my foot back onto the ground before turning my hips. I countered her missed right. My hand landed right against her jaw, the metal ebbing a dull thwack as it clapped against bone.

Thrown off balance, Kessiah stumbled backwards before glancing at me,

"Like seriously, did it really matter this much?"

I clamped my hand, gawking at it, "I don't really understand it exactly, but everything feels right. I'm not thinking anymore. I'm doing."

She frowned, "Well it's time to even the playing field a little bit."

She didn't dash towards me this time. She slowed her steady pace before reaching me. She swung with enough speed that I couldn't dodge anymore. Her hits tightened too, Kessiah firing simple, straight kicks and punches towards me. Deflecting head on attacks never worked, so instead of just backing away to avoid her thumping blows, I swung my own fists against hers.

My hands slammed into her incoming blows before bouncing off. I angled my strikes so that whenever they bounced off, they let me swing right back into another punch. This increased my speed by using hers. After diverting a few of her attacks like this, I gained enough leeway for striking back.

All the bonuses from my skills culminated until I got a swing in once every ten seconds or so. As the fight stretched out, my aggression turned visceral. I sliced my armor out as my hits landed, scraping Kessiah's skin. I tightened my core while deflecting her strikes. After a few minutes of going untouched, Kessiah smirked,

"Alright then, little guy. I'll kick up another gear."

Her blows grew heavier, some of them knocking me back. My feet dug deep into the ground as I slid, piles of dirt building behind me. She shot a right hand straight towards my head, but I ducked down. Her fist cleaved through a tree, wood fragmenting as she touched it. Wood wielded like water against her graze. She could've swam through the tree trunks if she wanted to.

Ignoring any roots or branches, Kessiah tore through them. Redirecting her blows took all of my strength. Even after swinging through a tree, Kessiah's strikes still hit like cannonballs against my

arms and shoulders and chest. To me, her strength and speed reached no limit. No matter how much better I moved and positioned myself, Kessiah overwhelmed me with raw power. It left me relishing in excitement.

I kept my eyes on her, and I didn't stop pressing the issue. I ducked and dodged. I punched and pummeled. I kept fighting, relentless as a plague. I watched her every movement, taking in how she timed her strikes and made her movements. I adjusted my own movements, taking advantage of the slight mistakes in her own style.

Like before, she strung her blows together in a continuous chain. That required concatenating her momentum together. Taking advantage of that weakness, I tucked in my own forms. My strikes shortened and condensed. My steps turned smaller, more lightened. When I hit back, I planted my heels until the force of the blow connected. Once the damage came through, I moved light on my feet once more.

This fluidity of motion combined with my timing during my deflections allowed me to maneuver around her brute strength. It was a strange feeling that came from A Boundless Storm. When I boxed and fought people before, I'd be the person trying to crush them with raw power. At that point in time, I evolved into the little guy darting around my opponent. Well, I attempted being that person.

Even with all these tactics and techniques, Kessiah slipped in more than a few blows. They dented my armor, sinking deep into my guts. Pain Resistance kept me afloat, ignoring the gravity of her hits. My augmented regeneration prevented the wounds from piling up as well. The main issue stemmed from my stamina. Fighting at such a high level for so long resulted in exhaustion, the kind that bled deep into the muscles and burned them.

Fatigue led to mistakes. Mistakes led to more pain and more exhaustion. After an hour of this undertaking, Kessiah sliced an uppercut into my chest. Her oppressive fist slammed into my stomach, the armor around her strike bending. My ribs broke and I keeled over. She struck the side of my unguarded head.

My body flung through the air, everything in sight spinning as I tumbled through branches and brambles. Blood seeped out of my armor as she walked towards me. I laid there heaving for breath before she lifted a foot over my head. She stomped down, and I pinned my arms to the ground. My armor dug tendrils into the dirt, giving me a solid grip. I shot my legs up while tilting my head.

An executioner's axe, her foot missed, scraping the side of my helmet. At the same time, I shoved my foot towards her chin with all my strength. My heel clashed into her mouth as her foot boomed on the ground beside me. My ears rang while the bones in my leg creaked at my heel's collision. Kessiah actually stumbled back a few feet before spitting out a bit of blood. She wiped her mouth,

"Hah, you actually did damage. Good for you."

My hp bar drifted just below a quarter at this point. The shockwave off her stomp busted my eardrums and left my head spinning. When I tried standing up, I stumbled sideways before falling

back onto the ground. Sitting there and scrambling, Kessiah walked over. I mustered a defense, but she ended the spar there, sitting beside me. She put a hand on my shoulder, and she smirked.

"Hey. That was a good fight."

I stared up at the sky with some frustration. I disagreed with Kessiah because this acted less as a fight and more a slaughter. Closing my eyes, it bought me some time away from my situation. Peering up at the treetops, I focused my thoughts on what I'd do next. Fighting Yawm looked like my only answer, as the guy aimed at destroying my hometown and maybe the whole region.

To beat someone like that, I needed more than just my fists.

After orienting my thoughts, I thanked Kessiah before moving back towards the quarry. Althea sat on top of a tree, looking out into the distance while fiddling with her biotic rifle. She used a few tools Torix gave her, Althea's eyes set on the interlocking parts. On the other hand, Torix sanded marks into the marble with a constant flow of his finger. He wrote less and welded more, sticking to etching.

I sat down onto the ground beside him. He didn't bother looking at me or asking where I'd been. Based on the filth enveloping me, Torix must have had an idea. The lich snapped his fingers, the dirt clearing off me before he said,

"You seem aimless. Anything bothering you?"

I frowned, "Yeah. It just feels like I was trying to find my friends forever, and now that I have, I lost my goal. Now I'm just...Floating around."

Torix tilted his head at his runes, "There are other goals for someone such as yourself, you know."

I leaned towards him, "Like what?"

Torix tilted his head at me, but continued working, "You can always improve yourself, or perhaps set your own goals. Besides for that, was there something particularly stinging that your friends accused you of? Perhaps something dissuaded you that you're not fully aware of. All these factors may work against you, motivationally speaking."

I furrowed my brow, peering at the ground. A second or so of thought passed before I nodded, "Yeah. My friends acted like I should've done more for them...Maybe I should have."

Torix cackled before sketching out a few more runes, "Now, I'll say this only once, disciple. If you expect others to do for you what you must do for yourself, you'll live with disappointment at every turn. If you expect nothing from others and treat yourself well, then your life will brim with excess. In that regard, your perspective and actions dictate how your life is experienced."

Torix tapped the wall with one of his dry, skeletal fingers, "It's actually quite interesting to ponder, isn't it? How much of our lives are decided by our perspectives? Being a rather cerebral individual, I assume most of it is, in fact, based on our mind rather than our reality."

I raised a brow, “So you’re saying even something like pain is only based on perception? I don’t know if I’m buying it.”

Torix swiped a hand, “Ah, a great example to my point. We’ll use your pain as a case study. It can be seen one of two ways: a force that has broken you down or a stimulus that incited your growth. Look at your trajectory and compare it to your friends.” Torix turned only his head to me, his eyes glowing green,

“By finding meaning in your pain, you’ve gained quite a bit of strength. That correlates to agency, a key component to overall satisfaction in life. Your friends, on the contrary, rob themselves of agency by blaming you for their circumstances. In their accusations, they gave the purpose of their pain away. That is why they stagnate whereas you grow, even if you’re rather beset by ruminations as of late.”

Torix went back to his work, etching into the runes. I pondered over what he said, his words more philosophical than what I was used to. After grasping Torix’s meaning, I liked it. What he said resonated with me, and I found truth in it. Those factors made believing easier, but the main reason I liked Torix’s ideas came from his results. The guy’s level and prestige came from somewhere, his methods working well.

And in time, I’d make those ideas my own. I gave Torix a slight grin, “Thanks for talking to me about this. It’s helped me out.”

Torix flourished a hand, beaming with pride, “It was my pleasure.”

I stood up, my eyes narrowing, “But, uh, you spied on the conversation, didn’t you? It’s obvious based on how much context you have about it, but I’m confirming.”

Torix took a step back, putting his hand over his robed chest. He made a mock surprise at my accusation, “Me? An undead lich *spying*? Why, I would never do such a thing. It would breach my ethical standards. After all, I draw the line at wielding other people’s corpses.”

Enjoying his dark humor despite myself, I crossed my arms, “I thought your deathknight got out of there after we arrived.”

Torix shrugged, “He did. It was the dark shade that saw everything. And don’t worry for your friend’s safety. I’m maintaining a few scouts for now. They’ll stop them dying, though they shouldn’t anticipate more than that.”

Torix peered up, “I wonder if the Force of Iron shall accept them? One can hope.”

I tapped my side, “Force of Iron, huh? What’s that?”

“Why, it’s a generic, branchless guild that Schema sends to new planets. It’s supposed to ease the transition process for new planets Schematization by offering advanced technology and magical techniques. Unfortunately, like all bureaucracies, they are incredibly slow, often arriving months after Schema’s initialization.”

I spread my arms, "Then they don't do very much?"

Torix pondered, "Hm, not for anyone that happens to be far away from wherever they land. I've sent scouts, and there happens to be a branch for the Force of Iron here. It's small, though existent. Michael should be more than able to receive the standards for recruitment. That Kelsey girl is another issue entirely, but I doubt she'll ever be much of anything."

Torix spoke with contempt dripping from his voice, "She is someone who blames circumstances for her failures. I'd like you to find anyone who does that and has done much of anything."

I clasped my hands into fists, "Eh, my armor and living in general was due to luck, and that's a circumstance. Either way, at least you're honest."

"I attempt to be."

I raised a hand, "So, you talked about goals. One of mine is learning magic. Not the book kind, but actual spells."

Torix snapped around as if waiting for me to say so, "Well then, you must know that for someone with Blood Magic, casting is more than merely painful; it's excruciating. Are you sure you'd enjoy incorporating it into your repertoire?"

I shrugged, "Yawm isn't going to wait, and I can't beat Kessiah with just movement alone. I'm gonna need a little bit of an edge."

Torix steepled his hands, "Oh, that can certainly be arranged."

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I pursed my lips and murmured, "Can it though?"

Torix shrugged, "It can, but there's a distinct reason why Althea doesn't use magic. You are about to discover it."

I raised an eyebrow, "Then why does she have arcane blood?"

Torix shrugged, "Likely, she was born with it." Torix turned to me before sitting in a chair of black. The dark energy buzzed lightly as he put his fingertips together,

"What kind of magic interests you? Your aura is powerful and with a few levels, you'd be able to beat anyone in hand to hand combat. What's with the sudden urge to learn the arcane arts?"

He snapped his fingers before a chair spawned behind me. As I sat down, I adjusted myself, noticing just how soft these things were,

"Well, there's three things I'm trying to fix." I lifted a finger, "First off, I've gained quite a bit of intelligence, willpower, and perception. I have the leveling perks for them too. This makes for a very

potent combination, letting me learn magic with relative ease. That's not something I can neglect, especially not long-term."

Torix tilted his head, "Fair enough."

I raised two fingers, "Second, having no meaningful way of attacking someone at range is one hell of a weakness. If I could get some way of elongating my attacks or something like it, I'd gain a lot of options."

Torix leaned back, crossing his legs, "Hmmm, very true."

I put up my third finger, "And I want to be a badass, fighting sorcerer."

Torix gave me a serious nod, "But of course. The most important reason of all. How else could you be a, what was it...ah yes, a *badass fighting sorcerer*? That is as good a reason as any."

I frowned, "Come on Torix. You're busting my balls. Why do you have to bust my balls?"

Torix actually laughed a little before waving an arm, "Alright, enough foolishness. I'll show you some of the basics."

Torix stood up before spawning a plume of cerulean shaded mana. It formed a blue fire in his right hand and a spiral of water in his left. He lifted them, "Magic is usually taught with the three forms of magic. Origin, dominion, and augmentation. I've spoken of them before. Each of them results in differing outcomes."

He pulled the fire and water together, creating a ball of steam. He clenched his hand, forcing the steam to collapse back into water, "This was the magic of origin. It is used to create something from nothing. In another word - generation. You become the origin of fire, earth, metal, whatever you can imagine, you may project. Elemental magic, summoning, even most high level healing spells are of this class."

He lifted a hand outwards, and a dark, sinister mana ebbed from his fingertips. Torix lifted a rock in the distance. He split the rock into cubes before making the pieces of it spiral like electrons around an atom,

"This is the magic of dominion. By extending your will, you may warp and bend the material and immaterial to your desires. Corruption, mind magic, and telekinesis are all under this branch of magic. Gravitation is as well. Forces that manipulate reside in dominion's domain."

Torix let the spinning rocks hit the ground as his hand encompassed in a wave of orange energy. Torix smashed that hand into an unmarked wall. The wall thundered out an echo before he grabbed a falling chunk of stone. He crushed it in his palm, "This is augmentation. By using your will, you may build on whatever it is you wish. I've seen augmenters even enhance their eyes and bones, or let their frail, old hands punch through stone."

I turned a hand to him, "And I was augmentation earlier, right? My mana was orange based on that affinity test."

Torix locked his hands behind himself, "Indeed, and the purity of your augmentation is quite high. You must be a believer in the self, one who thinks their fate is in their hands. Hold onto that, for it shall strengthen the augmenting effects you gain. Most people are like that, owning a singular affinity. The more focused a person's personality and actions, the more affinity they have for certain styles."

Torix leaned forward, "I, for instance, have an affinity for dominion magic. While I've practiced origin and augmentation magic as well, dominion comes naturally to me. I remember never creating something as powerful as the monsters I found on fringe worlds. That was when I focused my efforts into dominion magic, eventually even being able to control creatures as powerful as Moloth."

I leaned over Torix's hands, "All the books you gave me never mentioned all of this. It all seems pretty integral, if you know what I mean. Why didn't any of your books focus on it?"

Torix leaned onto a hand, "I was trying to teach you as much about magic as I could without you actually using any. Blood magic is truly painful, after all, and we may be diving into dark forces here. The arcane arts can be a malevolent journey, should you ever stray from its most obvious paths. I am an example of that. That Yawm of Flesh is as well."

Yawm summoned creatures far stronger than I was. He commanded armies of them, and his underlings far exceeded the might of anything humanity organized. I shivered at the thought of them capturing and using me as a mana battery or worse. Despite what they said to me, I even dwelled on what might happen to Michael and Kelsey.

As if reading my mind, Torix sighed, "Listen, disciple. I know leaving them wasn't easy. I understand that hollow feeling of loss, trust me. You have to swallow it and keep moving forward. Use that emptiness. Don't let yourself be consumed by it."

I peered up, "I think you're misunderstanding something. They chose to spit in my face. They'll deal with the consequences."

Torix leaned back, "Ah, so that's how it is then? Would you prefer I called my minions back then? I had a few overseeing them just in case any eldritch happened to wander by."

Trying not to care but failing, I frowned, "If you could, just leave something overlooking them. It doesn't have to be much."

Torix nodded, "Of course. Now, to continue with mana types. The most vital aspect is learning your affinity, then trying to work within it. The easiest method for finding your affinity is taking an emptied mana crystal and siphoning mana through it. Depending on what comes out, that may determine your natural generation."

I raised my brow, "What about the mana someone can tolerate? Would you run a test where you throw some raw mana on me to see if I can handle it or something?"

Torix turned up while grabbing his chin, "Hah. What a novel idea. I suppose we could. We already know your mana type, but if you're willing to perform the research, I'm willing to help. That being said, I'll need a piece of you."

I grabbed my arm out, "Why not just throw it in and see what happens?"

Torix shook his head, "The reason is simple - the consequences therein. Most likely, your body will reject another being's mana. If you aren't compatible with the mana, it can create horrific side effects."

I lowered my arm, "Then that's why the rip in dimensions was so dangerous."

Torix scoffed, "Dangerous? That was paramount to suicide. You lived through it, but count yourself lucky. Dabbling further in that nonsense will get you stripped into finite particles."

My armor wriggled across my skin, "Eh, we'll see. Couldn't I just give you some hair?"

"Hair is keratin strands squeezed out through follicles. What we need is tissue that is still alive. Some blood will work but flesh would be better."

I sighed before clapping my hand into a fist. I banged my helmet a few times, keeping my neck strut. After a few strikes, I peeled the loosened armor away from my arm. Squirming tendrils writhed from the wounded edges, healing me. Before the wound closed, I dug the sharpened points of my gauntlet into my arm. Quick and decisive, I ripped out some meat from my forearm.

It still hurt, though nowhere near the amount I expected. My brow furrowed, but I remained poised. I only let out a slight grimace before Torix guffawed,

"Disgusting, yet excellent. Tell me, what is your Pain Tolerance at?"

I checked my status screen, "Ninety four."

Torix's eyes flared, "No wonder that was rather anticlimactic. You weren't exaggerating about that old skill of yours, were you?"

"Yeah, Agony was, well, agonizing."

Torix lifted the bloodied flesh with telekinesis, "Duly noted." The necromancer lifted a hand, inducing a wave of mana like a tropical ocean's water. The mana fell into the patch of me, but the absorption slowed to a snail's pace seconds after. Torix's eyes flared white,

"And here I was doubtful that you'd have any talent for origin mana. It would seem that you have a slight inkling for it. That is...Unexpected."

I shrugged, "Well, I'm not really an airy type. I didn't think I'd have any talent for it either."

Torix leaned back, "Hm...Let's proceed."

Torix then created a stream of writhing black mana. Its purity and strength far exceeded the previous flow. The lich doused that torrent into the flesh. The mana seeped straight in before Torix gasped. His eyes flared a bright white,

"Your affinity for dominion is..Remarkable. I could've sworn you carried a singular affinity before. What's going on here?"

I pursed my lips while raising my brow, "What's the big deal?"

Torix gawked as more dominion energy seeped into the hunk of meat, "User's of dominion magic are often those that put their every effort into control. They plan out their actions whilst abusing every detail and piece of knowledge they have at their disposal. They don't desire control over themselves either. They desire control over their environments."

I crossed my arms, "Maybe this is because of the portal? This dark mana seems similar to the energy there."

Torix narrowed his eyes, "What? That energy is nothing like dominion. That portal carried deforming, volatile energies that warped and took over whatever it touched. Well, everything aside from that armor of yours. On the other hand, dominion never consumes, it merely controls."

I tapped a finger against my forearm, "I have no idea then. I know I didn't have this before the warp, and now I do. Call it obvious, but I think the two are correlated."

Torix nodded, "Perhaps. It's impossible to say without more information. Your next affinity will determine whether or not that is the case."

A vibrant steam of orange mana floated from Torix's hand before he guided the stream into the skin. The mana cackled and arced bits of energy before Torix leaned back into his chair,

"It was most certainly the portal. You have an excellent affinity for augmentation mana as well. That confirms it."

I raised a hand but kept my arms crossed, "I mean, we still don't know if I can produce the mana yet."

Torix grabbed his arm rests, "Each style of magic is guided by certain personalities. An excellent affinity in one oftentimes means a poor affinity in the other. Origin, for example, requires a loose, carefree individual. In order to originate, you must allow the magic itself to breathe and grow. This means relinquishing control, something the other two types of personalities struggle with."

Torix wisped dominion mana over his head, a looming cloud of black, "Then there is the magic of dominion. In a sense, this is the polar opposite of origin. Dominion users want control of their

environment and the people around them. They do not blame nor hate themselves after they make a mistake. They find fault in the situation and those around them. This gives them the drive and desire to change and warp the world around them."

I pointed at the cloud, "Ok. This makes sense so far."

Torix swirled the dark cloud, "Indeed. Augmentation users are different from both. Instead of focusing on the external, they look inward. They wish for control, but unless that control is of themselves, then it lacks any meaning. They are an interesting case study. They will often be the most afflicted with guilt or self loathing out of the three mana types."

Torix leaned his hands onto the chair, "Of course, most people fall between these three different types, or in other realms altogether. I had you pinned as an augments, so finding such a strong affinity with dominion was surprising. This gives us plenty to work with as far as magic is concerned."

I narrowed my eyes while pursing my lips, "So, uh...How do you turn your mana into different colors?"

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, "It is no color change. It is a total conversion."

He released a stream of dense, colorless mana from his hand, "Notice the lack of direction in this mana's current state. This means the mana is unguided and pure. The more mana, the more unstable it becomes."

The mana swirled into a compact ball before changing into a light blue, then a vibrant cyan. The mana pulsed in his hand, as if it were struggling to escape from his clutches, "This is converting it into origin."

The ball turned black, the edges rippling. The mana's trembling form eventually pulled outwards, like it was crawling into everything around him. "This is dominion."

The ball turned a vibrant orange, arcs of electricity rippling from it. This mana circled around the central point, a misty ball spiraling like a top. "And this is augmentation."

Torix pulled the mana back within himself, "It's simple really. You must focus on what you want and nothing else to produce a type of mana. That focus, resolve, even determination is what changes the mana. I shouldn't have to spell out what each desire is for each mana, now should I?"

I raised my hand, "Well, origin is the desire for creation, dominion is the desire for control, and augmentation is the desire for discipline. Hell, if I took it a bit further, I'd imagine some attributes help a lot with certain mana types."

"As for desires, you hit the mark aptly. For attributes, that isn't quite the case. The magic oriented attributes assist with all the different types of magic, regardless of your affinity. Still, having excellent strength would help tremendously with using your augmentation, for example. Dexterity allows for

finer use of dominion magics. Even origin is amplified by charisma, allowing you to control whatever it is you create."

I stood, "Alright, then do you have any tips on how I'd work on my augmentation?"

With an edge of disappointment in his voice, Torix coughed into a hand, "Ahem...Perhaps you should rethink your primary magical typing? Why not work on dominion magic instead? I have a few common breakthroughs I can share with you."

I punched forward into the air, "But I mean, augmentation will weave into my fighting style without me really having to adjust to the magic. It seems a lot more natural to use too."

Torix crumbled back into his chair, "Bah. Of course. I chose a simple minded soldier as a disciple. Fine. Go learn how to convert your mana then weave it into your style. I'll be here creating the ritual."

I patted Torix's shoulder, "I'll learn some dominion magic when we get Kessiah off world. We need you working on the ritual, not teaching a newcomer how to use basic magics."

Torix considered what I said before he straightened himself up, "I suppose so...Good luck then."

I turned and walked away, "You too."

"Oh, I don't need luck for something like this." Torix leaned towards the wall and began carving with a dark blot of mana on his hand, "I only need some time."

I ran off toward an unused portion of the quarry before creating another red stream of mana from my hand. This cooling energy carried no real intent or anything behind it. I just wanted a stream of magic, and boom, it arrived. This time, I tried controlling it, making it turn orange and let out the sparks from earlier. Nothing happened. After a few minutes of thinking about it, I tried out a different approach.

I aimed for control of myself as I summoned the mana. While willing the energy out, I remembered my history. I sifted through my past, focusing on regrets and mistakes. They stuck out, like missing bricks in a wall. What if I tried discovering Baldag-Ruhl's plot before killing Alfred? Torix may still have his son by his side. What if I handled the situation with Kelsey and Michael in a different way? Maybe we could still be friends, albeit at a distance.

This sinking feeling of regret molded in my chest before taking form in my palm. The lightly red mana turned into a reddish orange, more like blood soaked fire than thin red wine. Arcs of orange lightning rippled from the mass, like glowing sparks given life. They ebbed out from my hand and into my arm. My palm burned as I pressed more and more energy into my limb.

It mirrored Agony in its entirety, trading vitality for energy. All those weeks of wielding Agony granted me a close understanding of my health regen and where its limits were. Cranking the mana's power up, the orange radiated into my arm, a liquid and palpable power. I siphoned until I hit an equilibrium.

The drain on me ached more than I remembered. By now, I drew a large portion of my total health each minute.

Blazing through my blood and bones reminded me of Agony, but the feeling wasn't entirely unwelcome. It reminded me of BloodHollow and my triumphs there, that urgency both familiar and homey. I slept for a month with Agony keeping the bats away. In a twisted reversal, the discomfort signalled protection and safety to me by then.

Using that feeling, I found my threshold for my health regeneration matched my mana usage. After a few minutes, the feeling faded. The mana poured from my palm like a wild, blazing torrent. At that point, I tried pulling the mana into my arm.

My hand shook as a bead of sweat poured from my head. The torrent flattened in my hand before coming into my arm. A skill notification came up.

Skill gained! Augmentation(lvl 1) - Why fight with many when you may fight with one? +1% increased ease of generating augmentation mana.

Skill learned! Augmentation Manipulation(lvl 1) - Empower and embolden yourself so that none may stand against you. +1% increased ease of manipulating augmentation mana.

I gripped my hand, the power incredible and welcome. The pouring torrent of mana began sparking from my hand before another skill notification appeared.

Skill learned! Surge(lvl 1) - You wield your mind, and it wields your body. Now you've taken the next step, using the mind for physical fervor. In this, you turn your spirit into might. +1% to the effects of augmentation internalization.

My health depleted far faster as another message appeared.

Mythical Skill Interaction | A Boundless Storm promotes the skill Surge into Unending Tempest. Synergy between two skills amplified.

Unending Tempest(lvl 1) - Pain is fleeting, but victory is forever. +1% to the effects of augmentation internalization. +1% to the effects of A Boundless Storm during augmentation internalization.

The energy and vitality kept mounting and building in my palm. Strength flooded every fiber of my being, but the energy consumption burned my body away. It was like dipping my arm into a pit of magma. I stopped the stream before looking at my hand. The armor looked fine, so I pulled it off my fingers. Struggling to keep it off, I inspected the skin underneath.

It wasn't pretty.

Blots of blood were leaking out of my fingertips, like the flesh in my hand disintegrated. The nerves and control of the limb lessened, the nerves fried from the energy. I retained feeling via the metal wires lingering in my hand. Those strands stayed fine, surging with strength. After waiting a few

minutes, the blood disappeared and sensation returned to the skin and muscles. With Blood Magic, using augmentation would be risky business.

Of course, if I learned to handle it without letting it destroy me, its potential was limitless. Getting to that point was the real challenge. With that in mind, I ran another round of experiments. I produced as small a stream as possible from a finger tip. I figured just having the buff on at all times would be a tremendous increase in my effectiveness. This was because of the skill Unending Tempest.

It amplified the effects of A Boundless Storm when assimilating augmentation mana, but it never mentioned how much energy I needed to actually absorb. I kept that amount as low as I could, hoping I garnered the maximum benefits possible. This exercise of control also stopped the augmentation mana from running wild, giving me something to work at. Sitting cross legged on the ground, I hopped up and tried moving around. I ran into a problem immediately.

This whole magic thing was easier said than done. Finding the right balance was like balancing on a tightrope. That was too easy. Magic and moving reminded me of playing darts while on a unicycle. If walking with magic proved difficult, then using A Boundless Storm with sorcery far exceeded my abilities. Even if it seemed impossible, this absurd challenge gave me a goal, a condition I thrived under.

As I had before, I struggled through the process, one step at a time. Over and over, I tackled the mana while moving. It took me hours of working at it to walk. It took a day to run. Two days later, I overdid it. I drained mana until my bones gelatinized. My arm broke from lifting it, not even needing to hit anything. That accident illustrated a gruesome reality. If I died from overusing augmentation, my goopy remains would be turned into Torix's worst underling ever. I couldn't even be a zombie or a skeleton. I'd be a goopy slime.

However, that stress and the discomfort focused my efforts. Three days into this struggle, I activated A Boundless Storm. The clarity of the skill washed over me when it flicked on, helping me progress in my mana manipulation. Still in that deep concentration, I honed in on throwing punches as I wielded mana. From being, someone tapped my shoulder. I jumped, utterly unaware of my surroundings.

I turned and shouted, "Who the hell is that?"

I turned around, finding Althea leaning over my shoulder. She grabbed her arms from behind,

"Want to spar again?"

I raised my brow, "Really now?" I stood up, reaching out with my arms, "Alright, sure. What's got you smiling though?"

Mysterious and grinning, Althea narrowed her eyes, "You'll have to find out when you lose."

Rolling my shoulders, I grinned, "Nice confidence there. I look forward to breaking it."

