

14 Identity Crisis

My jaw dropped, "There's no way. Naw. That's impossible." A surge of panic raced up my chest, and I began trying to find plates where I could remove the armor. I found none.

Stacy raised up her palms to me, "Uhm, you ok?"

My voice rose, "Ok? You think I'm ok? The last boss was trapped here for centuries. *Centuries*. I am not going to be stuck here like that. Do you hear me? It's not going to happen."

David waved his hands, "Hey man, nobody said it would."

I peered at them before realizing I was panicking. Stacy took a step closer, "It's going to be alright. We're here to help."

I put my fingertips against my temples, "Yeah, you're right. Sorry. I just lost it there for a second." I took a deep breath, "So...What does it say exactly?"

The two of them gave each other a look, measuring if I could handle the situation. I raised a fist, "Guys, I'm alright now. I can take it."

Stacy spoke in a light, easy voice, "So, like, Schema is outlining your status in black like a boss. Your name is actually purple though, so I don't really know what that means."

I waved my hands, "Can I see it?"

She walked back up, "Here, let me show you."

I raised an eyebrow, "Wait a minute...You can look at someone else's status? Really?"

Stacy nodded, "Yeah, you just have to give them permission to view with your thoughts. Schema does the rest. It was in-"

I crossed my arms, "The tutorial. Yeah, I figured. Go ahead and open it up."

She frowned at me, "Someone's in a bad mood, huh?"

I pursed my lips, "Uh, yeah. Apparently, I lost my ticket out of here."

She paced up, and her status came with her. I viewed myself from her eyes.

Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 82 | Unknown) - A powerful warrior possessed by an armor crafted from limitless eldritch energy and untold volumes of interdimensional energy. This being is an abomination, an incarnation of endless amounts of eldritch. With an aura

that will kill most enemies in seconds and incredible durability, it is nigh immune to most damage. It carries a measure of strength as well. Most worthy of note, this creature's tenacity is far above average.

This creature is extremely dangerous to you, so avoid it at all costs.

I spread my arms, "Why in the hell am I the boss? A boss with a purple name and everything."

David scratched the side of his head. Stacy cupped her chin, saying, "You've definitely seemed less human since we met back up."

I pointed at Stacy while looking at David, "But that's the thing. She *actually* looks like a monster. Why isn't she the boss?"

David burst into laughter. Stacy rolled her eyes, "Real witty, boss man. Anyways, quit being a jerk for a second. We're trying to help you out."

I shifted my weight from one leg to the other, "Alright, alright."

David pinched the bridge of his nose, "I'm thinking back, and I remember Schema mentioning an 'unknown status' for certain creatures. It's a punishment or something."

I blinked, "Punishment? For what exactly? Trying to get out of this place?"

David shrugged, "Hell if I know man. I'm just glad we're finally able to leave."

Stacy scrolled through her status, and she sighed, "So, I reread everything...I think the Unknown status means you're not considered protected by Schema. It's like you're a monster that can still level up or something. For example, we could kill you, and we wouldn't get in trouble. You'd actually give us doubled experience."

My eyes sharpened, "Kill me? For experience?"

Stacy threw her hand at me, "It's an example, ok? Anyways, mister demon lord, how about you explain what happened while we were asleep. We waited a day for you."

I explained Baldag-Ruhl's ritual and him trying to steal my soul. They ooh-ed and ah-ed at some of my descriptions before David pointed at the rustic booklet, "Yeah...That matches up perfectly with this journal."

I frowned, "Journal?"

"Yeah. When we woke up, you weren't around. We went looking for you, and we shouted for hours. You were gone for over a day. We thought you just got tired of us and decided to leave."

Stacy crossed her arms, "I figured you just went off to kill the boss. David's the one who thought you left us."

David gave Stacy an exasperated look before turning a hand to me,

"Point is, we explored the cave, looking for the boss or some way out. The journal was back where you fought the Lord of Worms. He had hidden it at the bottom of the runic pool. It kept the bugs out, making everything in the pool invisible to Baldag-Ruhl's minions.

Stacy raised her arm, "That's why I'm soaked."

David raised his brow, "She lost rock paper scissors, but yeah, this was written by Alfred Worm. He was the Lord of Worms. It was kind of hard to read because he started writing it after the whole corrupted soul thing."

I paced over towards the book, picking it up with care. This guy saved my life. I clasped my hand. Technically, Alfred gave me my armor too. I tried putting pieces of the torn cover together before giving up on that. I opened it, exposing the yellowed pages. In a neat cursive, I read what it held inside.

Hello there. If you're reading this, you've no doubt killed me and taken my diary from the pool near a corpse. My corpse, hopefully. If so, then a thank you is in order.

You see, I've been a part of a plan. A plan from well before either of us were born. It starts with a fascination of mine. That fascination rests over magic. To my undoing, I have a penchant for all things unknown, for the whimsical and bizzare. Those inclinations brought me here, to the BloodHollow Caves.

Those inclinations are also why my remains haunt this abyssal place.

Perhaps some context may guide your further understanding. Firstly, my father was a necromancer. He was known as Torix Worm, of Darkhill. He gave me a dark legacy, one riddled with things better left unspoken of and moreover, unlearned. I despised him. He killed many out of spite, and now he twists their remains for his own devices. His magic and might, they left me in his shadow. And there is only one way out of a shadow.

To the light.

I reasoned that my father spent his existence stealing life, so I would spend my life giving it. The most reliable source for this exploration was from an unlikely source - ambient mana. This is because of the energies' unique properties and the innate properties of mana itself.

Mana, it is a representation of will and intellect. My father described it as the physical manifestation of one's will and intelligence. Intelligence is the force one can output. One's will is the duration one may extend said intelligence.

Those are the attributes that guide ambient mana's creation as mana is one's consciousness given a form physical in nature. With this understanding, I searched out for better ways of understanding the mana lingering around us.

When I did so, I found a world newly touched by Schema's presence. Few sought after the depths of dungeons, and I was one of those few. With a satchel full of tomes and a goal centered in my mind, I entered this dungeon.

I had one purpose - create life from the mana that Schema found so destitute.

It was the will of minds left untempered. In my arrogance, I believed I was able to control those processes. To enact my will, I strengthened my magic over time, and like my father, I showed quite the talent for necromancy. However, I never killed for my materials. Most often, I used animals. Rarely, I would find the family members and ask for their permission.

A timely process, but that was how I slept at night doing such dark things. When I reached inside the caves, I found the bats to be easy for my skeletons to handle. They released no mana I could hold, however. No matter how many I slew, I found none from them. Even more concerning, there was no ruler of this dungeon.

No matter how many times I passed through this dungeon's halls, the creature was nowhere to be found. That is, until I discovered how to produce the ambient mana I so dearly sought. With the correct alignment of runes, I could create a sort of pipeline from our dimension and the, for a lack of a better word, 'darker' one.

This was no true tear in dimensions, but a seeping of sorts. This process would create pools of glowing water, each shining pink. The bears of the cave enjoyed this light, basking in its glow. They were the only enemies I had found here, along with the umbral bats. Once the water of the cave filled, I discovered a set of beetles collecting on the edges of my pools.

They would sit there with remarkable patience, almost as if they were watching me. As if they were waiting for something. Over time, they walked closer and closer. One day, I turned to them and shouted,

"You are a rather peculiar pack of beetles, aren't you?"

In all my days, I have never come closer to a heart attack than when it replied with a powerful, ancient voice,

"I am so much more."

I learned that this was the ruler of this dungeon. A hivemind of insects that called itself Baldag-Ruhl, of Many. We stayed on good terms for years after that. He was well spoken. At times, even more well spoken than I. We told tall tales of more than just this cave. We discussed a wide, open world with so much to see and feel.

During those tales, I could sense an almost palpable hunger from him. I could not blame him. I had all I needed here for my research, and I'd always been a hermit of sorts. I owned plenty of stimulus from a steady supply of bear meat and my mana pools. He wished for quite a bit more than I. He wanted freedom.

So he helped me with my research. With a fervor rivalling my own, he toiled day and night, learning the incantations, formulas, and runes. I would wake with him still working on new algorithms of the arcane. His sheer frenzy amazed me. In my eyes, Schema had been wrong all along. These monsters were no such thing. They had souls. Baldag-Ruhl was their shining example of such.

It wasn't until I began growing old that he changed. Less a student and more an equal, he and I spoke of magical theory for long stretches of time. He was my closest friend and the champion of my cause. Over the years, we crafted many of these pools. In the richer spots, a wondrous cyan color was created. No animal here could handle such strong light, so they wandered away from these basins. I enjoyed bathing and swimming in these during idle days.

I had come so close to discovering some means for holding this ambient mana. That was when I had my breakthrough; I could tie the ambient mana to cores crafted from condensed balls of my own mana. This gave them purpose, a goal. Not quite life, but something akin to it.

With the revolution in our process, Baldag-Ruhl began creating his magnum opus. An incantation of such complexity, length, and precision, it would open a portal into his dimension and let him escape here. I helped as much as I could. Hours we would toil on it, pouring sweat like oxen under a summer sun.

It was during that work that I understood the extent of Baldag-Ruhl's genius. He taught me that I merely dabbled in a watered down version of the runes. Years passed, and I learned of the true runes he taught. They defied convention, able to break the laws of nature.

Using those runes, we broached on the finalization of his ritual. I remember completing the center of the expanse. That was when Baldag-Ruhl betrayed me. He cast his spell, trapping me within the center of the spell. He exclaimed the sheer madness of using my soul for escape. However, there was but one flaw in his plan.

I had brought the cores with me that day, along with the ambient mana. I assimilated it into my own mana, corrupting me. This resulted in the guardian Sentinel attacking me on sight. I also gained an uncanny amount of mana during that time.

Mana I then put to good use. With a violent spell of my own, Baldag-Ruhl's spell shattered, sending his grotesque form flying into a nearby wall. Using the chance, I escaped from his grasp and used the thickest pool of mana for my defense. The gray pools would leak mana thick enough for sustaining these cores, strengthening them over time. They would act as guardians of the mana locked there. Though my mind may fall apart, my will did not. I continued experimenting until I uncovered a magnum opus of my own.

The Corundum of Souls.

This gemstone accomplished my goals of using mana to generate life. I've fed mana into the construct since its creation, but the voices, they shout against me even now. As I write, my hands shake and tremble. They are not my own. They become someone else's, a monster beyond reason.

I will warp, in time. To any I kill that arrive here, I wish to offer my sincerest apologies. I beg you...Please, forgive me for my sins. The mana seeped into my own, warping it, corrupting it utterly. My mind fades further as I write this. The ambient mana carries the fragments of madness within them like the minds of madmen. I am becoming...insane.

I fear by the time of your reading this, I will have fallen into depravity. The necromancy I so desperately wished to reform is now my only defence. I find myself murdering any adventurer's who enter this cave, terrified of Baldag-Ruhl using them.

One day, an adventurer will come who can kill me. By then, this...Corundum of Souls will hopefully be complete. Baldag-Ruhl will attempt to use you for his own twisted goals. Please, I beg you, stop him. Do not let him ruin the world as he has ruined me. I give up the last vestiges of my fading soul for a chance at redemption.

These will be my final few words. Let my father know...I understand him now. This world is not corrupted by people. People are corrupted by it in turn.

I blinked, and the rest of the page was torn out. Peering closer, I found more notes, but they fall into the madness Alfred described.

I hate this scratching...I want to eat. I will rule the dirt....Ruler of Worms. No. Lord...of Worms...'

I glanced back up, "Well...I'm glad we helped him find redemption after death." I shook the book, "This would've been helpful to have before the final fight. There would've been fewer surprises."

Stacy and David shifted in place. We stood in silence for a moment. It was a respectful sort of quiet, the kind found at a funeral or graveyard. It passed as quickly as it came when I put the book on top of their packs, "Well, any ideas on what to do now?"

David said, "You took the dungeon core, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then we reach the Sentinel and leave."

I tapped the edge of my helmet. A sharp, metallic sound echoed in the cave, "Any plans on what to do as far as I'm concerned? I'm pretty damn sure the Sentinel will attack me on sight."

David narrowed his eyes, "You still have the golem cores right?"

"I do, but what about them?"

A wicked smile traced his lips as he said, "Then I have a plan."

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Stacy crossed her arms and deadpanned, "Really? Let's hear it then."

David looked around with confidence, "So here's what we'll do. We can reanimate the golems and then set them off after the Sentinel. While the Sentinel's distracted, we'll sneak past the gateway."

An awkward silence passed over us before Stacy and I peered at each other. I raised my hand, "David...Do you know how to reanimate golems?"

David frowned, "Well, uh...No."

Stacy facepalmed, "And how long do you think the golems will keep the Sentinel distracted?"

David blinked, "I'm pretty sure if it's level one thousand, the golems might keep it busy for a few seconds."

I sighed before glaring at the guy, "Ahh yes. He then kills the golems in a second before killing me. Of course, of course. An excellent plan David, truly."

David pointed at me, "I don't see you coming up with any better ideas."

I shrugged, "We don't have the resources to pull off any crazy stunts. Let's try talking it out, and I'll let you guys lead the way."

David crossed his arms, "Why do you think that's going to work but not using the golems as a decoy?"

I gestured one arm to my left, "Because one plan involves not indirectly attacking the sentinel." I gestured to my right, "On the other hand, the other plan *does*. That makes one of them intrinsically better."

Stacy shrugged, "Well, let's get moving guys. We won't know until we show up."

David and I nodded before we started packing up. Peering at Alfred's diary, I wanted to carry it with me, but my armor got in the way. Responding to what I wanted, a portion of my chest splintered open. A maw of metal metal reached out, wrapping tendrils around the book. It swallowed it before anyone could respond.

It lurched back to me, pulling right into my chest. I gawked down at myself in horror, "What in the hell was that?"

My horror paled when compared to Stacy and David's own, and they stared at me, each of their expressions blank. I raised my hands, "Guys, I wanted to hold the book. That's it."

Like galena crystals weighing us down, a heavy stillness passed over us. This was no simple silence. The quiet carried a cutting edge of wild fear in it, and as I stared at David and Stacy's eyes, I found that terror. It oozed out of them. Then and there, a pang shot up my chest, and I peered down, cringing inside.

They were going to leave. I just knew. David spoke first, his voice cold, "Uhm...Yeah. That...It's totally fine."

Stacy raised her hands, "Absolutely. Hey, it happens to the best of us."

I furrowed my brow, "Yeah...for sure."

David waved his hands, "Yeah, so like, the Sentinel will definitely let you leave wearing something like that."

A weak smile traced my lips while I peered up. My new helmet covered it. "Good, I'm glad you guys agree. Come on. Let's go."

They packed quicker than usual, and we walked off towards the Sentinel. After a while of fighting off the stronger bats, I paced ahead of the others. I shouted behind me, "Keep your distance."

I willed Oppression, and the aura reared out. A swollen bat swooped down towards me. I narrowed my eyes before catching it. I raised it up over my head and slammed it into the ground. Like a gelatinous blob, it exploded outwards like a squishing watermelon.

David and Stacy stared at me as I slammed my hand into the head of another bat. It splattered into goo before one of them tried diving at my back. It caught on my new thickened spines. The

blood dripped down my back before I pulled it off and ripped it in half. Other bats withered to darkened slush in Oppression's aura.

David spoke to Stacy, thinking I couldn't hear him, "Man, he does seem different, doesn't he?"

I frowned, my gaze turning hard. Another bat took the dive to me, and I growled while smashing its teeth in. I slung some gunk off my hand, speaking with a cool edge to my voice,

"Sorry guys if there's too much gore. It's kind of hard to kill bats any other way considering I'm using my bare hands."

Stacy shouted back, "Don't worry about us."

I didn't anymore. I got them out of this damn cave, and now they treated me like a monster because my armor freaked out. Yeah, it was scary, but that didn't make *me* scary. I wasn't my armor, after all.

Either way, I made excellent time despite the two of them holding me back. We ended up spending several days walking on the outer edge of BloodHollow before reaching the Sentinel. During that time, their fear showed more but so did my resentment of the situation.

I tried taking the armor off, but it wouldn't budge. There weren't any plates to speak off, and the only thing I learned was how to get the helmet to peel back. It left an eerie impression even on me, having the metal glide backwards like that. When it did cover my face, a crimson light ebbed out at all times too. It did me no favors when trying not to scare people.

Like before, I became accustomed to silence again. I trained as we walked, practicing punches and my footwork. It was calming for me like meditation or something. By the time we reached the sentinel, I could tell the two of them wanted out and so did I.

When we reached the Sentinel's pit, David approached it, "Alright, so here's the plan-

Fed up, I leapt into the pit. I lost levity as gravity pulled me down. My stomach floated in my chest before I landed fifty feet down on the edge of the pit. I kept my feet steady, grinding my way down to the ground before landing several hundred feet below.

I walked over towards the sentinel, my damaging aura off this time, "Yo. What's up?"

It turned to me, whipping its spear. It crackled with violet lightning as the Sentinel glared at me, "You wish to come this close then, riftkeeper? Know that I have not chosen to let you live. Schema has done so."

In a flurry of spinning the Sentinel cleaved the bladed edge of its spear through several nearby boulders. Sliced fragments slid down the crags, glowing magma left on their cleaved edges. The Sentinel scoffed,

“But if you choose to die now, then let it be so.”

I raised my hands, taking a step back, “Woah, steady there hoss. I’m back from earlier. I killed the boss, and I want to get out of here.” I grimaced at the boulders, “Not get sliced up for doing what Schema asked.”

The Sentinel bent over and took a closer glance at me. After a few seconds, it planted its spear down,

“You...You are the human I saw before. How have you devolved into this...Abomination.”

A surge of anger coursed through my mind, but I held my tongue while mouthing, “Baldag-Ruhl wasn’t something I could beat without carrying a few scars. Now, do you mind letting me out now?”

The sentinel stood back up, not quite twice my height anymore. He still dwarfed me while peering down, “Unknowns are normally allowed to leave, but based on your records, you are an exception. Your presence is too volatile.”

I stamped its spear down, “I will destroy you if you attempt doing so.”

I held my eyes shut for a second, a spiking, violent anger surging up my chest. This entire situation in BloodHollow, from start to finish, was unfair. I wasn’t given a tutorial. I got put in some armor I couldn’t take off. People, who I thought were my friends, were now terrified of me. Standing here after having pulled through it all, I was being told I couldn’t leave.

I snapped at it, “What the hell is wrong with Schema? I killed the dungeon keeper like it asked. It’s dead. Me? I’m not the threat here. *It was*. I got the core and was told I could leave. I’m supposed to be able to get out of this dark, miserable hole now. I need to get out of here.”

“You cannot?”

I threw my hands up, taking a step closer to it, “Do you just expect me to stay here forever?”

“Yes, unless you are authorized to leave.”

I took a breath before opening my status, willing the Sentinel to see it, “What about this message. It says I can leave.”

The Sentinel peered at the message, "Hm. That is the appropriate authorization. You may leave at your leisure."

"Then I'll be going."

It raised a palm to me, announcing, "Halt. You are not allowed passage. I will only warn you once."

I showed it the message again, and the Sentinel replied with frustration,

"Human, perhaps you are hard of hearing. I will repeat myself - you may leave at any time."

I tried stepping up to the gate, and the Sentinel lifted its spear, "You have chosen death."

I shouted at it, "Are you bipolar? Either that or you and Schema are lying to me."

The Sentinel slammed its spear back down, "Do not speak blasphemy in my presence."

I rubbed my temples, "But it gave me a message saying I can leave. Now, I can't. Isn't that lying?"

The Sentinel leaned back. "Yes. Wait...But no...Fine. I will allow you to pass."

I spread out my hands, "It's about damn time." I turned to David and Stacy, "Alright guys. I'll come get you guys down the wall."

Stacy and David had crawled about halfway down the pit to my surprise. They steep slope didn't really deter them, each of them feeling their way down. It reminded me of mountain goats. I pursed my lips,

"Damn guys. You never told me you were rock climbers."

Stacy shouted, "It's the system. I got this dexterity perk, and that is the *only* reason I am doing this crazy bs."

David spoke with a shaking voice, "Same."

They got down about ten minutes later. As they got closer to the Sentinel, they gaped in awe at its majesty. Of course they would. I did too. The carnage it left behind only added to its impression, and I was glad it was on our side. If anything, it could've cleared this dungeon with ease.

Wondering why it didn't, I looked up at it,

"So, uh, Sentinel guy...Why don't you kill the monsters yourself?"

It stated, "Ambient mana corrupts over time. You are a perfect example of this disgusting, abhorrent phenomenon. Schema cherishes us Sentinels, so it wouldn't waste our might on something so paltry."

I put my hands on my hips, "Oh yeah, instead of killing the dimension destroying monsters, Schema has you guys standing in front of doors. What a prioritizer, let me tell yah."

The robotic entity processed what I said over a few moments before gazing down at me,

"Ah yes, I remember this emotion from long ago. I believe it is hatred."

I furrowed my brow, "Good. Let's get out of here."

David peered at me like I was crazy, "Your balls are made of steel man. I'd never talk to that guy like that."

I shook my head, "It's not that I'm brave. I just know how these things work. They obey orders, and thoroughly."

The sentinel simmered, "Lucky for you, simpleton."

I shrugged, "Last time I checked, standing in front of a door was a lot less complicated than killing monsters. You sure I'm the simpleton?"

The Sentinel stared forward, "Yes. No more speaking."

I waved a hand at David and Stacy, "See you guys on the other side."

The doorway opened, revealing the outside of the cave. I paced out, finding myself on the edge of a hillside. A patch of green turf gave way to the vibrance of a forest. The warm wind hit my face. The sunshine beamed down on me. I could hear birds singing, and the rich smell of earth and trees hit me like a truck.

I'd never missed the forest so much. I quelled a wave of emotion as I stepped out. The grass and dirt hugged my feet with a soft embrace when compared to the stone. I rubbed my feet against it, relishing the sensation as Stacy and David walked out from behind me. The Sentinel slammed the hilt of his spear, snapping the doors shut behind us.

The Sentinel's voice radiated from our surroundings, "I have decided that instead of making the decision on my own, I will leave it to Schema."

The Sentinel rumbled, "Remember this human - Schema is much harsher than I. Disrespect it, and you will suffer."

That seemed like good advice, so I nodded before a voice popped up in my head. It was cold, the kind of cold that burns your hands and numbs your nose. The closest thing like it would be the eldritch energy that Baldag released. To me, this wasn't something sentient. It was a machine through and through.

"Unknown variable detected. Owns entry key ID 84295730549. Entry allowed. Access denied. Entry allowed. Access denied. Higher clearance required. Assistance request sent...Assistance request accepted."

Stacy and David sat in the turf as the biting cold stopped in an instant. A warmth came and replaced it. The voice like Morgan Freeman and an old british guy came back up,

"You seem surprised. I'm Schema. Well, a portion of it. You just spoke with one of hundreds of personal AI's of mine. Unlike me, they are limited in scope. I automate most functions with them. Now, explain the situation in detail using your own words. I need to understand your situation before I can act."

Grateful for an outlet, I explained Baldag-Ruhl's story in detail, along with Alfred Worm's own take. Schema listened intently, asking pointed questions at times. He spoke with the familiarity of an old friend. By the end of the conversation, my animosity towards the AI melted. I just couldn't bring myself to dislike him.

After finishing with how the Sentinel sent the request, Schema sighed, "This is a difficult situation...On the one hand, you are a tremendous risk. I hope you understand that. There are volatile energies in that armor, and they may grow over time. You could very well unsettle the careful balance I've created."

My heart sank. I even mentioned quite a few heroic details about my time there. They obviously didn't do much. Schema's voice rose, "That is, unless you aim to help keep my balance stable."

I opened my status, "Check this out. I need ambient mana for my armor's evolutions anyway. Surely that'll help with the balance thing."

"Ah, your armor can absorb the rift energy? Interesting...I've decided what I'll do. I'll allow you to leave this place if you accept a detailed and extensive set of requirements. They will include the clearing of other rifts, killing less stable Unknowns, and reaching a quota of ambient mana absorbed every month."

Hope rose in my chest as Schema said, "This is non-negotiable. If you choose not to accept, I will strip you from the system. You will become this rift's new keeper."

As it appeared, I clicked the yes button to whatever terms Schema gave me. Staying in BloodHollow simply wasn't an option. Schema radiated warmth, "Good. Your decisiveness will help you in the future. It will help me. Goodbye."

The presence left, snapping away in an instant. Without knowing it, I let out a huge lungful of air. I breathed out the tension as messages appeared.

Proof of Loyalty - There are things that fall outside the realm of Schema's control or even understanding. You are what is sent to kill these things, whatever they may be.

0/3 Unknowns killed | Timeline(10 years left)

Proof of Societal Adherence - Clearing a dungeon is a tall order, and many choose to avoid it. You have been commanded to destroy many.

0/3 Dungeons cores obtained | Timeline(1 year left)

Experimental Procedures - You are a monster. Become he who eats monsters.

0/2,000,000 ambient mana eaten | Timeline(1 month)

Glancing at the requirements, they weren't bad by any means. In all honesty, I intended on doing this even if I just messed around. Well, besides for the Unknown part. I didn't really know how to even begin looking for one, but I had ten whole years ahead of me. I'd worry about it if they turned out to be super rare.

Turning to the doors, I shouted, "Yo Sentinel. If you can hear me, I just wanted to say thanks for giving me this chance."

The Sentinel spoke from all angles, "I did nothing. Turn your praise from me to Schema. He is your true saviour."

I gave that some thought, hoping it was true. Peering around, David and Stacy disappeared. I squeezed a hand into a fist, thinking they darted away while I wasn't looking. I grimaced. I didn't need them then.

They both walked out of some trees, carrying a few squirrels. I beamed a smile at them both, finding myself beaming despite myself. They came up and we roasted the squirrels over a fire. Simple as it was, the change in flavor made all the difference. We indulged ourselves on these delicacies.

As we did, my armor peeled back without me thinking about it. It responded to basic needs so far, like, you know, using the bathroom and stuff. The only thing it didn't do was peel off. Thinking about it coming all the way off, I shivered. For some reason, that thought disturbed me.

As we finished the squirrels, David scratched the back of his head, "Hey, you know...We never really thanked you for saving us or getting us out of there. I mean, it's like-"

I put my hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry about it. When I saw you guys looking so pitiful, I had to save you guys."

Stacy smiled, "Yeah, well, thanks anyways."

A comradery came over us, and the awkward tension from the last couple days just oozed into ether. We joked around. We talked about our builds. We just...Had a good time. Ending the hoopla, Stacy leaned towards the fire,

"What are you going to do now, Daniel?"

"Hm. I'm going home to check out if anyone's there. After that, I'll probably look for my friends. What about you guys?"

David winced, "I'm getting ready to get screamed at by my parents."

Stacy's shoulders went slack, "Yeah. Same."

I shrugged as I said, "You know, maybe we can clear a dungeon later. If I'm looking for someone, I'll hit you guys up."

An uneasy look passed over them. David gave a curt nod, "Uh, yeah. Sure."

Ah. They were just trying to leave on good terms. A part of me wanted to call them out, to make them say it out loud. I chose not to because I wanted us to avoid the drama. I took a breath and stood up, "I have to go guys. This was fun."

They nodded and Stacy said, "Looks like it's time for our parents to kill us."

I banged my leg, a metallic ring echoing, "My old man's going to need a miracle to get that done." I raised hand, turning to my hometown, "See you guys."

I walked off while they gave me a wave. Moments later, I ran instead of walking. People walked because running every came with issues like ruining clothes, getting sweaty, and destroying joints. Not worrying about all of that, I got moving. I dashed right through thick brambles and dense underbrush. I darted over thick boulders and fallen logs.

I wielded my new body like a wedge, and I drove it through the forest with glee. It was fun just experiencing the system's gains, and it let me wind down after all the pressure in the dungeon. I kept that pace for a few minutes before stopping far away from anyone. Surrounded by a sea of green, I wondered what Oppression would do here.

Making sure no one was close, I activated Oppression. The aura's impact manifested over a few seconds. The world around me died. All the leaves on the trees fell, brown and dried. The trunks twisted and contorted under oppression's might. Brushes coiled into dead branches. The birds fell to the ground, turning to slush in seconds.

I shut Oppression down. I shivered for a second, staring at my hands. What happened in that cave was no dream. It was as real as the wind on my back and the sun lighting my way forward. A part of me knew this was real even without testing anything. The system and Schema were as solid and substantial as gravity.

And yet, a part of me denied everything up till now. After seeing the devastation somewhere familiar, the denial lodged in me withered away like the trees. Seeing an old playground fall apart like that tended to have that effect. It gave me a sense of urgency and unease as I ran towards my old home.

I came across the first inklings of the city. There existed an old, industrial center on the way home. As I passed it, the system's effects showed themselves. First off, no one dotted the streets. It was a ghost town outside of disparate campfires spread throughout the landscape. I found them via smoke plumes drifting in the air.

Those drifting spots rose up from all angles. A few fires raged from those spots. Quite a few buildings burned down like barbecue joints or certain restaurants. I found factories standing amidst crumbled pillars. Adding to the emptiness, lots of empty cars haunted the roads, making them nearly unusable.

Some of those cars showed scuff marks where people ploughed through blockages and sidewalks. Many cars smashed right into poles, other cars, and even buildings in certain spots. People left everything out in the open, from shopping carts to baby carriages. My stomach sank at the thought of what happened to those babies in the tutorial.

I didn't dwell on it.

I kept moving. As I passed through stores, I found them already raided. People robbed the owners blind, taking anything that wasn't bolted to the floor a while back. Some shopping carts went missing, the buggies used to carry the goods elsewhere. At least people weren't starving. Yet.

I passed the industrial district, getting more towards the suburbia of Springfield. It was wedged between the main town and the industrial sectors. People looked for leisure in the former and work in the latter. A lot of the factories were abandoned by now, the industrial jobs going elsewhere.

Well, the suburbia followed suit in the system's wake. There wasn't any power, and cars still littered the streets. I walked over broken glass from shattered windows, and I found people

using fires outside to cook food. I tried waving at one group, but they screamed at the sight of me.

I gritted my teeth at that, a bit scorned by them howling despite my cordial wave. Either way, I kept to myself afterwards. I didn't have the energy to explain my situation to everybody, and despite only seeing that group for a few seconds, I learned a lot.

Scars littered them, from their hands to their faces. I wasn't the only one that battled it out. That was good. Lots of people weren't adjusting well yet, but some made their mark already. The survivors would pool together, and like humanity always did, they'd make it happen.

Hoping I'd find some people I knew among them, I found my father's old apartment. Our apartment. The power wasn't on, as I expected. Passing the parking lot, I found dad's beat up convertible sitting in the parking lot. At the sight of it, fear raced up my chest. Leaving the car alone wasn't a good sign.

Don't get me wrong, I hated my dad. He was a grade-A jackass of the highest order. My resentments aside, I didn't want the guy dead. I ran up the exposed stairwell on the side of our apartment. The metal stairs clanked before I reached the second floor of the place. I found the doors to each apartment building broken down, including ours.

I ran into the familiar studio apartment. As always, trash littered the floor, but the kitchen reeked like something died in it; Dad had left the refrigerator door open. Without the power working right, flies and bacteria were well on their way to making our food into a disgusting slop. I leaned over it, everything a bit smaller than it used to be.

The ceilings were shorter than I remembered. I walked around, finding no trace of dad anywhere. A pack of half emptied beers laid beside his bed, and someone tore the place upside down searching for valuables. They didn't find anything, of course, but it still felt awful having someone tear through our stuff.

I reached my bed, the futan. I kept all my clothes folded under it, along with my school supplies. My boxing gloves were still squeezed between the wall and the sofa. I took them out, staring at the worn, faded leather.

I took a breath, closing my eyes. What had I expected, exactly? A warm welcome? People glad I was home? It wasn't going to be that damn easy. If dad survived the tutorial, and that was a big if, he probably came home for a hot minute and left. He got what he could before bailing.

Knowing he might've left, I searched for signs of what he did while he was here. I peered around, not finding his boots anywhere. He always came back from his construction job with mud all over them, and they left footprints on the carpet. Getting him to stop doing that was the

same as getting him to clean up. It was a waste of time. That bad habit did leave its mark, however.

I found those footprints leading outside. Using my better eyesight, I found some footprints less aged than others, still kind of moist. I also found the same boot marks on the doors of our neighbor's apartment. The bookmarks led inside each building. Walking out of a ransacked apartment, I leaned my head against a doorway before kicking in a nearby wall.

My dad survived all right. He came back here and looted our neighbors. I tapped my head against one of the kicked in doors. Waves of burning, searing shame passed over me. Sometimes, I just wanted dad's blood out of me. It was like a festering infection under my skin. I wanted to just get the hell away from him, to be somewhere he wasn't.

I reared an arm back and smashed it into the doorframe of our apartment. The wood crushed in, sheetrock snapping like tissue paper. I smiled at the wounded entrance. I let out a laugh. An epiphany struck me, and it was so obvious after thinking about it.

I never had to see him again.

I reared a foot back, kicking into one of the walls of our room. My foot smashed through a stud, and my leg ended up piercing the wall halfway. I let out another laugh, pulling my foot back out. I never had to come here again. The world had changed in its entirety and I along with it. This place was me clinging to normalcy, but that was dead and gone.

I let out another laugh. On impulse, I ran through our apartment, smashing furniture, our tv, and my old bed. I laughed so much I scared myself. I turned the fridge over, throwing dishes and breaking the glass. I flipped the sink, tearing the pipes with a heaving shove. I ravaged the walls, and I tore dad's mattress in half too.

It was a goodbye to this place. It was a goodbye to everything my life had ever been and would ever be. I ripped the walls off and smashed the windows. I laughed like a madman, the catharsis so sweet and intoxicating. This hellhole was where I got beat for so many years. Now, I returned the favor to the walls that watched me the entire time.

As I walked out of that place, the roof caved in where dad normally slept. Dust piled at the bottom of the room, and it looked like a molten hailstorm turned the place inside out. The mastermind behind it all, I wiped my hands clean of the place, smacking my palms together with satisfaction.

Damn. I needed that.

16 A City Torn

Taking a step away from my old life and into a new one, I began my search for Michael and Kelsey. The first obvious place to search was where they lived. Kelsey stayed in a nicer part of Springfield's suburbia while Michael was in a forested home. Choosing the closer of the two places first, I walked the streets in that direction.

Passing the abandoned cityscape, I found a few loners or vagrants. Some of them looted shops or homes. Others searched for others while shouting aloud. On a street near Kelsey's home, I walked up to one of these individuals seeking a loved one. It was an older man, mid forties with short hair. His clothes were covered in sweat and grime, but he cleaned himself up since the tutorial.

He shouted the name Ashley over and over. Trying to strike up a conversation, I jogged up with a hand raised,

"Hey man, have you seen a girl nam-"

His eyes went wild at the sight of me, the guy on edge. I stopped approaching and raised my palms, "Woah man, calm down."

He took pistol out of his back pocket, and my blood froze over when he pointed it at me. Without any preamble, the barrel flashed several times. My chest thudded with several heavy impacts, blood seeping down my stomach. I spit up blood, peering down. Several bullets lodged into my chest, cracking through my chest plate.

I glared at him, fear warping into fury. I darted sideways, moving my head and staying low. He fired twice more before his gun began clicking. I dashed towards him right after as he scrambled to load another clip.

Before he could reload, I was upon him. I grabbed him with a hand, lifting him up. I grabbed the gun out of his hand, and as I pulled it away from him, several of his fingers snapped. He howled out in anguish as I threw the gun down. Parts flung in all directions before I stomped the plated steel. It bent underfoot, the barrel unusable now.

I roared at him, "What the fuck was that? Huh? Why did you fire at me?"

My armor grinned a crimson red, the ominous light leaking out. Jagged, metal teeth lurched open, and the man I held lost the little reason he had left. He tried pulling and jerking at my hand, but he was weak. Holding there, I watched his eyes go bloodshot as he scrambled for an escape.

I wanted to give him a firm slap, but even now, I couldn't really gauge my strength. I held a fully grown man up with a single arm. It required serious effort, but that wasn't possible before the

system. The man hadn't invested in constitution yet either, so he was soft and pliable like a loaf of bread.

Unlike bread, he'd scream if I squeezed.

So I dropped him. He fell down and back, scrounging for an escape. Like some kind of animal, he sprinted away while grasping his broken fingers. I peered away before spitting up some blood. Looking down, I swallowed before turning around. A few prying eyes peered on from within homes nearby, but they stayed to themselves.

Not wanting to get shot again, I hopped several fences before laying down in a cluster of bushes. Looking down, blood dribbled from my wounds like dripping faucets. I shook off some fatigue before resolving myself. I took a shaking hand and reached into a wound.

Like fire dampened with ice, a tolerable pain surged up through my shoulder. I reached around until I found something hard. Pulling a lead round out, I gasped as it fell onto the dirt beneath me. I followed the same process for all the other bullets, cringing as each metallic round fell out of my chest.

By the end of it all, I heaved for breath. Pain Tolerance or not, this wore me down quickly. My chest healed up before I stayed in the bushes, afraid of other people at this point. If anything, it was a miracle I survived the six rounds in my chest. It left my health at around half, which meant a series of headshots could still kill me.

After several minutes, I regenerated. Coming up with a different approach, I snuck through the suburbia's back yards and foliage. It wasn't the best cover by any means, but it was better than walking out in the open. I kept my helmet up as well, not wanting a stray bullet to kill me instantly. People seemed a bit too trigger happy to take that risk.

I reached Kelsey's house, and I found the upper class home in shambles. They used a cut and fill style home, one built partially into the hill. Something pried a gaping hole into the bricks of their basement. It was like a giant creature erupted from the lower level of their home. That made the roof cave in on the upper floor, ruining the home.

Creeping around and peering in windows, no one stayed within. I knocked on the door, breaking a window on accident as I did. It didn't matter. No one was home, and walking in through the unlocked door, I could see why.

Massive rats nested here. Peering at me as I walked in, they chewed at canned food and bagged groceries. The beady eyes locked with mine, and I inspected them.

Sewer Rat | lvl 6 - Sewer rats are some of the weakest creatures to spawn from dungeons. They escape often and rise from the depths of different areas, often times

within days of the system arriving. While not dangerous alone, a pack of rats can swarm a sleeping or vulnerable adventurer, chewing them apart in minutes.

You have nothing to fear from these creatures.

They swarmed me. Rats crawled from all angles, knocking over furniture, antiques, and glassware. I kicked the first rat, and it splattered. The gunk got in the eyes of two other rats who let out tiny howls. I swung at two more rats, making them into a red paste across the room. Entrails and guts spilled as I culled the local population, and when half of them were dead, the rodents retreated.

I followed them, inspecting rooms for clues about Kelsey as I did. I found little to work off of. I wasn't as lucky here as I was with my place. Nobody owned a pair of muddy boots here. In fact, it didn't look like they did more than peer inside and leave. That's why I couldn't piece together anything tangible.

Reaching the basement, I found a cavern leading underground. It reeked of sulphur and soil. Claw marks smothered the walls of the tunnel, and pieces of broken concrete and brick sprawled out into the basement. Something tore out of this place from the ground up, and it was loose in the neighborhood.

I didn't really care about the trigger happy population here. I kept myself focused, trying to find clues about Kelsey. Peering into the tunnel, I found it fed into the sewer below the city. Curiosity flamed in my chest, and there might be hints about Kelsey's whereabouts down there.

Taking the dive into the unknown, I went back underground after having left it earlier that day. Unlike BloodHollow, this was an entirely different kind of dungeon. Nothing quarantined the beasts into the place, letting them run amoc. This was where the rats in Kelsey's home retreated to, so I followed the swarming tide.

It was a different world down there. Vibrant greens grew all over the place. Glowing mushrooms lit the way as I crushed and pulped the rats nearby. Pacing down the tunnel and into the sewer proper, life overtook the concrete walkways.

The foliage carried a neon shade to it, bright beyond belief. I gawked at the sight of everything, purple and violet flowers leaving glowing trails of sweet smelling pollen. The rats feasted on this buffet of life. Along the way, I found glowing patches of green algae over the sewer's waters. One patch of the algae shot out and pulled a rat into the water, disappearing into the depths below.

I kept my distance, hugging the edges of the walkways. I killed rats along the way, keeping Oppression deactivated for now. I didn't want to kill someone on the surface above me. Pushing

forward, I left a trail of red muck and killed rats behind me. In this wondrous path, I forged a trail through the teeming life.

I stayed on edge the entire time despite the low level of the monsters here. The reason for that was simple - my armor trembled. Like a stone landing in a well, tiny ripples crossed over my skin as I left corpses behind me. Unnerved but still undeterred, I pushed through the vines. Inevitably, I found crosswalks where portions of the sewer connected.

Here, tiny wooden walkways built up between the gaps of water. I inspected one, finding crude knotwork holding it all together with vines. Trying to figure out what happened, I zoned out at the variety of miniature architecture I found here.

From behind me, a whistling knocked me out of my trance. I covered my neck, and an arrow snapped across my shoulder. I turned around, finding rats on their hind legs. Standing upright, they glared at me while other members cruised in from all angles. Like little soldiers, they came at me with sticks, swords, and shields.

I raised my hands, "Woah now, I'm not here-"

More arrows snapped against my chest. I pointed at a tiny archer, "Hey, stop-"

A stick smacked against my cheek, a stinging pain dousing my mercy in an instant. The rat soldier swung at my face again, but I caught the stick. I pulled it to me before swiping my hand sideways. Its skull crushed against the wall to my left as I growled,

"You want more? Huh?"

They attacked in a swarm. I kicked them to pieces. I shattered their bones. I ripped them apart. Despite my dominance, they showed no fear. Something pushed them forth, but I wasn't about to make excuses for my enemies. They chose to fight me, and I would crush them for it.

Going deeper into this microcosm, I used my minimap for direction. Winding twists and abrupt turns followed the homes overhead. I followed the tunnels, finding endless waves of rats both standing and on all fours.

But I found no trace of Kelsey or Michael. Getting ready to leave, I found a developed section of the rat's civilization. Here, a gate stood between me and one of the sewer's deadends. I kicked the wooden stakes apart, the wood splintering. A large rat wore a crown of vines and bioluminescent flowers.

He screeched at the other rats beside him, and they tried defending themselves. I rushed them, goring them apart in sprays of blood and guts. Grotesque but effective, I left them and their bodies mangled. The boss was only level twelve at this point, after all.

Peering around, I found trinkets from the surface littered about. Perusing it all, I got insected kitchen utensils, broken bottles, and a weaponized stapler. I shot out some ineffective staples from the jury-rigged junk before finding a pile of picture frames. In the pile, I uncovered a cracked frame with Kelsey on it.

It showed her mom, dad, and extended family on it from a few years ago. I lifted it up, grinning at it. Instead of searching for only her, I could use this to find people related to her now. That opened up my inspection immensely.

Finding what I really wanted, I walked past a chainmail vest not even worth carrying. Kicking it aside, I strutted past the rat king's body. As I did, my metal chest plate crinkled before launching out. The jagged, crushing teeth chomped into the rat king's body.

I stumbled back as my armor tore the corpse into bite-sized chunks. Unable to stop my armor, it swallowed the rat's body before I could even respond. A cold sweat dripped down the back of my neck as I stayed pressed against the wall of the dungeon.

I peered down, disgusted with the armor. Looking around, I found one of the tiny swords the rats used earlier. I pried at a piece of armor on my arm, trying to get it off. I pierced into the flesh, trying to gouge it off. I tore off a plate, and it peeled off like a crab's shell. To my horror, my skin came off with the armor. That was nothing.

Peering under the plate, tiny, metal, and squirming feelers wriggled towards my flesh.

I scrambled back to the edge of the wall, grabbing the sides of my head. The plate slapped back down, and it fused back to my skin. I didn't feel the legs crawl into my arm. I didn't even feel itchy either, the plate's return entirely natural. If anything, trying to peel it off had felt like flaying myself alive.

And yet, I wanted it off. I wanted the armor the hell away from me. Sitting there, panic turned into self pity. I was a monster. I couldn't find my friends. I couldn't even talk to anyone anymore. I had hoped that getting out of the cave would've made me less isolated. If anything, I felt worse. People avoided me like I was some demonic creature.

It...It was like I was howling at the top of my lungs in a crowd, but no one could hear me scream.

I blinked away tears from shock before controlling my breathing. As I calmed down, I pulled myself together. I already put so much into surviving this whole process. I was sure as hell not going to let this armor stop me from following through. I held onto the hope that I'd get out of here, find my friends, and they'd help me.

And I'd help them too.

Hoping for answers, I checked my character screen, wondering if it could explain anything. It actually did. I gained twelve hundred ambient mana from the rat king. It wasn't much compared to what I needed, but it would be enough to handle Schema's quest, in time. Well, assuming I faced stronger enemies.

Either way, the flood of panic passed before I started looking for a way out of the sewers. Several manholes led up to the surface nearby, but dense underbrush smothered the exits. I kept wondering around for an easy one to pry up through before a few voices echoed from afar. Curiosity came over me, and I snuck my way up to the discussion.

As I closed in, I realized the voices weren't human.

One whispered its words light like air,

"Stay on your toes. You never know if we'll need to kill a native."

Fear raced up my spine while another voice laughed,

"There's nothing here above level ten. Don't worry about it. We'll take a few cores, sell them, and live somewhere nice and safe. It isn't like a native could...What was that?"

One of the rats came running up to me from behind. I glared at it, wishing it would die. I kicked it into paste. Hearing the commotion, two reptilian humanoids ran in, each of them thin and gangly. They peered around with horned brows, needle teeth, and flicking tongues. One hissed,

"Who's there?"

I hid behind a cluster of vines, my body blending in with the dark stone. Peering from behind the vine's cover, I got a good look at them. Magenta scales covered one, sparks of violet energy radiating from its right hand. The other, a forest green color, brandished its claws while keeping a sword holstered. They wore gear crafted from monsters of all kinds, feathers and claws adding to their aesthetic.

Schema finally identified them for me.

Gelg Monok, Skeptile Scavenger(lvl 112) - A scavenger of the Skeptile people. He roams newly assimilated planets, attempting to harvest dungeon cores before the native populace can. These behaviours have put a bounty on his head, foregoing Schema's protection policies.

Therefore, this creature should be killed on sight for experience and other rewards.

Moronos Golgon, Skeptile Scavenger(lvl 132) - Showcasing an affinity for arcane magic, this skeptilian mercenary inflicts unmitigatable damage. His class and build was designed for damaging and killing sentients. These behaviours have put a bounty on his

head, foregoing Schema's protection policies.

He roams newly assimilated planets, hunting for unobtained dungeon cores. Therefore, this creature should be killed on sight for experience and other rewards.

They met my eye before the pink one opened his right hand, the sparks coalescing into streaks of violet lightning. His hand thrummed with chaotic energy as if he held a ball of entropy in his hand. He simmered,

"Oh, an *unknown*. This one'll give us experience, unlike the last one."