

Chapter 1: Grinding

"I order you to... speak out loud what really went through your head when you read the description of *that* class, and you were thinking about those thick, wriggling roots."

"I thought that if I caught a muncher and put... gah!" I bit down on my tongue mid-sentence, just about managing not to finish it.

Mind magic resistance advanced to level 15

"Aww, you're too good at this already. I wanted to embarrass you. Oh, I know. One-word answers; they wouldn't give you time to fight back. I order you to answer yes or no; do you want to go another round with queeny?"

"Yes." Dammit!

"Wow, you really are a..."

"Don't even say it!" I yelled, interrupting my evil zombie twin. And here I was thinking that letting her use a slave collar on me would be a safe and effective way of maxing out my mind magic resistance before picking my second class. Did she really have my personality? How did everyone back on Earth not flee from me on sight? Or had this all happened since I got here?

"I order you to answer yes or no; do you miss home?"

"Yes." Wait, what? Where did that one come from? Oh, right, she can never return to Earth, no matter what happens here... She gave me a sad little smile, before the corners of her mouth curled up further into an evil grin. Uh oh... I slammed my mouth shut, desperate to stop myself from answering her next question.

"I order you to answer yes or no; are you enjoying this interrogation?"

"Yes," I answered from between my clenched teeth. Dammit *again!* I just couldn't stop myself quickly enough to avoid an answer from slipping out.

Mind magic resistance advanced to level 16

"Yup, you're definitely one of *those*. I've heard gamification can make people act in ways they normally wouldn't, but seeing what's become of you just because you got a status screen and some upwards ticking skill counters is kinda disturbing. *Fun*, yes, but still disturbing. I order you to strip."

My armour vanished into my item box before I'd even mentally processed her order and what it was I needed to stop myself from doing, leaving me naked on the shrine floor. I glared and quickly redressed myself.

"Looking good," said my tormentor, giving me a thumbs up.

"I think we need to switch roles," I muttered.

"But I don't have skills to increase. Sorry, but this is all for your own good. What level now?"

"Sixteen."

"Still four more to go then... What else to make you do? Oh, I know, of all the fox-kin you've met so far, which one did you most want to pet?"

That one was easier to keep my mouth shut for, because I didn't actually know her name. I'd just spotted her behind the arch-priestess, looking incredibly cute and fluffy, with a tail so bushy that I could almost have hidden in it. Had I not been preoccupied at the time, I definitely would have struggled to resist the urge.

"No answer? Guess you didn't manage to get her name after leaving me behind then. Pity."

...Of course, it didn't help that my zombie twin already knew the answers, and hence which questions to ask. I squirmed in embarrassment, waiting for the next order to come.

"Want to train disease resistance too?"

I tried to keep my mouth shut, but needn't have bothered. It hadn't been an order. "Yes? But how?" I hazarded, expecting the worst.

"Like this," answered my zombie twin, positioning herself right in front of me. "Kiss me," she ordered.

I struggled my hardest, honestly, but didn't quite manage to avoid contact. My disease nullification immediately alerted me to the massive amount of blight tearing into my face, and I reeled backwards, coughing, trying not to breathe in any of the infection. Fortunately, the shrine purged it from the air; my skill-boosted immune system was already struggling just against the amount that had already attacked me.

Disease nullification advanced to level 24

"You just wanted to kiss me," I muttered. "That's practically masturbation!"

"But you enjoyed it, didn't you?" she whispered in my ear, this time ordering me to answer.

Mind magic resistance advanced to level 17

"...No," I successfully lied.

My zombie twin burst out laughing. "Not bad, but you're going to need better control over your voice than that to fool me," she managed, once the laughter had died down. "Don't forget, I know all about that little collection of books you keep under your bed."

Argg... This new version of me was *evil!*

She could do with a better name than 'zombie twin', but appraisal clearly called her Katie, and I wasn't so callous as to tell her she needed to abandon that name just because she wasn't the real one. It wasn't as if there was any confusion while it was just the two of us. Oh, I know! She's a duplicate, and her name is Katie, so dupliKatie!

"Hmm... Speaking of things in your mouth, did you ever regret not letting Si'janrii..."

That wiped the grin at my bad pun off my face in an instant. "No," I snapped, not even letting her finish. This game was consensual. That was not. There was a big difference. "And you damn well know it."

"Of course, but I have to vary the questions. They can't all be things you *don't* want to answer truthfully. Hmm... What to ask next?"

And so continued the next couple of hours, with my newfound evil twin trying to wring as much embarrassment from me as possible. Still, it was fun having someone I could be open with for once, even if that someone was myself. Heck, it was nice to have someone to talk to at all for the first time in weeks who wasn't either insane or trying to kill me.

Okay, so maybe she was a *little* insane, but no more than I was. It was a shame she hadn't split from me on the first day, before I'd got my body and mind quite so badly messed up. Or perhaps not; I doubted the me from back then would survive a sudden transition to undead zombie with her mind intact.

By the time I'd got to level twenty, I could reliably ignore orders. I still couldn't lie convincingly, but I could keep my mouth shut at least. That would be good enough. It was a shame I didn't get an evolution for it, but it would do for now, and hopefully stop me getting completely mind-raped in the future.

Disease nullification gained another level, but levelling that was something I didn't want to rush, at least

not using the undead blight. One evil twin was enough, and I didn't want to risk accidentally making more.

With that brief bout of levelling completed, it was time to move onto training combat skills, but first I had something else I wanted to check; if my increase to level six had any effect. Status!

Name: Katie

Primary class: Princess of undying laughter (level 6)

- Class skills -

Trigger respawn

Item box [Enhance]

Mapping [Enhance]

Appraisal [Enhance]

Resistance focus [Enhance]

Fast travel [Enhance]

Secondary class: None [+]

- Combat skills -

Unarmed dabbler: Level 5

Proficient dodger: Level 10

Spear proficiency: Level 16

Proficient blocker: Level 13

Dagger proficiency: Level 15

Sword proficiency: Level 10

- Resistance skills -

Friend of fear

Pain nullification: Level 30

Poison nullification: Level 30

Corrosion nullification: Level 25

Disease nullification: Level 25

Mind magic resistance: Level 20

Heat tolerance: Level 4

Light tolerance: Level 1

Cold resistance: Level 20

- Crafting skills -

Improvisational artisan: Level 12

Artistry: Level 4

- Scouting skills -

Novice stealth: Level 9

Sense presence: Level 8

Novice empath: Level 6

- Magic skills -

Sense mana: Level 6

Bend mana: Level 4

An enhance option? It looked like the level up did something after all. Did it perhaps have anything to do with the way skills gradually improved as I gained levels? Again, the lack of instructions was a problem. If I hit that button, would it enhance the skill immediately, or would it give me a description and confirmation dialogue first? Could I only pick one? Would it improve it all the way to the maximum, or only act as if I'd bought the skill one level later?

Not that any of those questions made much difference. I would read through all the descriptions if I could,

but I was very likely to pick item box. It was far and away my most useful class skill, and if it was bigger, it would prevent future issues with losing my stuff to rampaging fox-kin. I hit the metaphorical button.

Skill enhanced: Item box

Grant access to a spatial pocket in which a large amount of equipment can be stored. Time does not pass for stored items.

No confirmation, but it got bigger, *and* gained a time stop function! I'd be willing to bet that was more than just the difference between picking the skill at level one and level two. I'd have to test just how big it was, but given that even the small version fitted my armour, weapons, shields, spares and a few miscellanea, this one must be far better. Plus, I could take food without it spoiling, or even cooling down if I ever managed to cook anything. The murder tree's poison, too. It was an amazing upgrade.

"Oh? What are you smiling about?" asked my zombie twin.

"Item box got a big upgrade," I answered on autopilot before even thinking about it. Stupid slave collar. "Looks like I still need to keep concentrating to avoid accidentally spilling things out..." I added, reclaiming the collar and stashing it back in my new, improved item box.

Bend mana advanced to level 5

Oh, bonus!

"Aww, spoilsport," complained my zombie twin.

"That's enough Katie abuse for one day, I think."

"Oh, cool, so I get to abuse you more tomorrow then?"

"That... wasn't quite what I meant."

"You didn't say no though."

I gave my zombie twin the best glare that I could manage before pulling my sword and shield out of my item box.

"You're still not saying no," she pointed out.

"Indeed not. Tell you what; beat me and I'll let you kiss me again. Once I've finished recovering from the last time."

The Katie shaped zombie gave me a *very* concerning grin before she *blurred*. I barely had enough time to raise my shield to block her sword slash, and utterly failed to defend against the kick that followed it, slamming back-first into the wall.

"Whu?" I asked, stumbling.

"I did say I was better with my sword than I had any right to be," she answered, smirking.

Great, another blight filled smooching session coming right up. When she said she was better, I assumed she meant compared to our original, unskilled self, not compared to me with my second tier skills!

A rather unfair beat-down followed, albeit one that netted me five levels of sword proficiency and proficient dodger, as well as four of proficient blocker. She was faster than me, stronger than me, and more skilled than me. When her species description said she'd been strengthened by the blight, it wasn't kidding around.

Being the first time I was having a real sword fight also finally got me novice parrier and took it straight to level ten.

New skill gained: Novice parrier

It is commonly said that a good offence is the best defence. Using a weapon to defend with isn't quite what the originator of this phrase had in mind, but it's close enough. This skill aids you in parrying blows with any weapon.

Of course, she did have the disadvantage that she wouldn't respawn, but all that meant was that I had to go easy on her to avoid any fatal accidents, whereas she had no such concerns. The only thing that worked in my favour was that whatever equivalent she had to my sword proficiency skill didn't seem to boost damage in the same way, and she couldn't penetrate my armour.

Of course, that just meant I ended up covered in bruises, quite possibly with some cracked bones, rather than leaking out blood all over the place. Actually, that raised an interesting question, given that she hadn't managed to cut me yet.

"Hey, hold up a minute," I shouted, causing my overly eager tormentor to slow down. "Does your sword still have a paralysis effect?"

"No idea. What does your appraisal skill say?"

"Nothing. It appraises as being a part of you, not as a separate item."

"One way to find out then."

"Indeed. I was wondering what sort of resistance skill would work against it if it did, since all the other sources of paralysis we came across were poisons."

"Well, armour off then. Let's give it a go."

My armour went back into the item box, and I was once again glad of my cold resistance, despite the increased warmth near the shrine. I held out a sacrificial arm to let my zombie twin make a small cut.

"You could have cut yourself with your own sword anytime you wanted, you know," she pointed out.

"Somehow I never thought about it until... Ouch!"

"You have maximum level pain nullification. Don't be such a baby."

I ignored her, instead paying attention to the numbness spreading through my arm. There was blight in there, but not an enormous amount. There was also something else. My arm's movements became sluggish and unwieldy.

New skill gained: Curse tolerance

Not all magical attacks aim to deliver raw damage. Inflicting sleep, weakness, or paralysis are common ways to debilitate an enemy to capture it alive or make it easier to kill. This skill will offer a small amount of aid in rejecting such negative effects.

A new skill! Awesome. And so a few minutes later I had gained a few more levels of it, for the price of ending up naked on the floor with all four limbs paralysed. And my evil zombie twin standing over me, smirking. I didn't fully think this one through, did I?

"I think it's time to claim that kiss you owe me," she said.

Disease nullification advanced to level 26

Chapter 2: Picking the Wrong Class

The lack of any skill evolutions was a shame, and reduced the likelihood of me getting any new classes out of that training session, but it was still very much worth it, in my opinion. Lots of levels, most of which would be useful, and even two new skills. Time to find out what options I had for my second class.

"I demand a running commentary," insisted my zombie twin, who was currently doing a slave collar

powered headstand against one wall, as my revenge for her earlier kissing attack.

Available class: Scout (Basic)

Information is power, and there is a great advantage to spotting your foes before they spot you. This class will offer skills that aid in detection, stealth and exploration.

Unlock requirements: Possess at least one scouting skill.

Class features: Increased physical dexterity and heightened perception.

Skill domain: Scouting

That was unchanged from last time, but where did warrior go? "First one is scout this time," I called. "No change from last time."

"Boring. Next!"

Available class: Mage (Basic)

Magic can warp the rules of reality, conjuring ice or flame, earth or air. Difficult to master, but powerful beyond imagining if mastery is ever achieved, mages tend to start out weak but have almost unlimited potential.

Unlock requirements: Possess at least one magic skill.

Class features: Increased intelligence. Increased mana storage and regeneration.

Skill domain: Magic

"Next is a basic mage class. Starts weak but good growth potential, according to the description."

"Finally! But you have two magic skills, so there should be some better versions later."

Available class: Warrior (Common)

Hold the stick by the blunt end and poke the pointy end in your foes. Simple, but effective, and this common warrior class will aid you in doing just that.

Unlock requirements: Possess at least two second tier combat skills.

Class features: Increased physical strength and endurance.

Skill domain: Combat

Oh, that's where warrior got to. The rarity and unlock requirements went up. Nothing else seemed to have changed, though. Surely it should have improved somehow? Would the skills it offered be better? Did the stat boost increase a bit? "Found warrior. Apparently having tier two combat skills made it common instead of basic."

"Still boring. Skip over all the repeats," she replied.

The next one was aranea hunter, completely unchanged from the first time. Berserker didn't appear at all, presumably because I no longer fulfilled the requirement to have an offensive skill higher than my defensive. Gardener did, and was dutifully ignored. That left some common versions of scout and mage.

Available class: Assassin (Common)

The next logical progression of spotting a foe before they spot you is to dispatch them before they spot you. This class is for those who do not wish to fight, but who simply want their enemies dead.

Backstabbing, poisons or traps, there are many ways to take out an opponent without them ever seeing your face, and this class will help you with them all.

Unlock requirements: Use poison against an enemy. Attack any enemy while undetected. Exploit the environment against an opponent. Possess at least two scouting skills.

Class features: Increased potency for poisons you produce. Attacks while undetected deal more damage.

Increased physical dexterity and heightened perception.

Skill domain: Scouting

"Oh, here's an interesting one. Assassin, an upgraded version of a scout. Good for backstabbing and

poisoning things. When did I exploit the environment against an opponent, though?"

"Probably when we tricked the arch-priestess into killing a room full of warriors? Anyway, that one sounds decent."

Right, that did happen, didn't it? It had been an eventful few weeks. And I agreed. Best sounding one so far.

Available class: Explorer (Common)

Someone needs to be the first to set foot in unexplored dungeons or forgotten ruins. And if someone has to do it, it might as well be you. This class aids in exploration and keeping yourself safe in unfamiliar terrain.

Unlock requirements: Be the first of your kind to set foot in a dungeon, and accurately map out at least one floor. Possess at least two scouting skills.

Class features: Intuitively recognise dungeon floor monster and trap density and variety. Increased physical dexterity and greatly heightened perception.

Skill domain: Scouting

"And the next one is explorer, which is only common yet has an unlock requirement of being the first of a species to enter a dungeon."

"Maybe dungeons are really common and short-lived?"

"They'd have to turn up under every sofa for this class to actually be common. Assassin was better, anyway."

Available class: Flame mage (Common)

Magic can warp the rules of reality, conjuring ice or flame, earth or air. Difficult to master, but powerful beyond imagining if mastery is ever achieved, mages tend to start out weak but have almost unlimited potential. This particular class specialises in flames, showing greater proficiency with fire than other elements.

Unlock requirements: Witness high level flame magic. Possess at least two magic skills.

Class features: Increased damage with flame based spells. Increased intelligence. Increased mana storage and regeneration.

Skill domain: Magic

Did the dragon's breath count as magic? Probably, or he'd have melted his own throat, and I couldn't think where else I'd have got it.

"Flame mage. Like a normal mage, but with more fire."

"Interesting. Setting things on fire sounds fun, but I still think assassin would be cooler."

"Might let me finally cook some food, though."

The next few were mind, ice and decay mages, which were identical to flame mage but with the element swapped out. Mind mage was interesting... I noted that one down as an option. And that ended the common classes.

Available class: Chilopoda hunter (Uncommon)

Whether by circumstance or design, some people end up coming face to face with a significant number of chilopoda. Most people would get fed up with them. Some people do not, and make chilopoda hunting their career choice, in which case this class will help to ensure they continue to survive the encounters.

Unlock requirements: Kill at least a hundred chilopoda of any species. Possess poison resistance.

Possess at least three combat skills of tier two or above.

Class features: Increased physical strength and endurance. Damage bonus against chilopoda. Resistance

skills are more effective against any venoms produced by chilopoda.

Skill domain: Combat

"Chilopoda hunter. Like aranea hunter, but uncommon, with higher unlock requirements. Presumably aranea hunter didn't get the upgrade because I'd have needed to kill a hundred of them instead of ten."

"Nope. I don't think either of us want to see another one of those. Were they still treating you like family when you went for the mana crystal?"

"Yup."

"Gross..."

"Yup."

The next one was vulpes hunter, which was worse. I'd not killed *any* of them. Did it count everyone who had died in the brief civil war or something? That was followed by an upgrade of survivalist, with the same unlock requirements except requiring all the skills to be second tier. Despite the upgrade, it was still labelled as uncommon, but the class features had changed to count as an achievement for rank two skills.

Then there were my old rare classes, two of which were unchanged. The third, perverted masochist was gone, thank goodness, presumably because having pain nullification disqualified me.

The old classes were followed by a few more extras, although I almost feared to look at what weird things I'd picked up this time.

Available class: Bondage aficionado (Rare)

Just how, exactly, do you keep ending up in so many compromising situations? Bound by the roots of an angelica vorax, cocooned by an aranea volito, entombed by a chilopoda sagacitas, twice, repeatedly tied up by a vulpes sagax, enslaved by an enchanted collar, webbed and paralysed by the kiss of an aranea regina. But it's not as if you hate it, right? You even invented a ranking system and started taking comparative notes.

Unlock requirements: Take your love of bondage far and wide.

Class features: Increased sensitivity to touch. Your body becomes immune to damage suffered from holding uncomfortable positions for long periods.

Skill domain: Special

Ah, so perverted masochist didn't go away. It just mutated into something fractionally less objectionable. I dismissed it with a sigh.

"Oi! What was that one?"

"Nothing."

"It was a perverted masochist upgrade, wasn't it? Admit it!"

"More of a side-grade. No, wait! I said it was nothing!"

Available class: Blighted champion (Rare)

There are, for reasons of desperation, insanity or greed, those among the living who choose to aid the spread of the undead blight. Such people tend not to remain living for very long, whether because saner individuals murder them, or because they fall to the blight themselves. Should that be your desire, this class shall seal your fate, sending you into the eternal grip of undeath, as a true champion of the blight.

Unlock requirements: Infect over a thousand creatures with the undead blight. Willingly infect yourself with the undead blight.

Class features: Race transition to undead revenant. Increased transmission of undead blight.

Skill domain: Special

Oops... Guess the blight must have spread pretty well upstairs, then... So that would be why the other class had claimed I'd killed a hundred vulpes. "This one says it'll change my race to undead revenant," I read out.

"Ooo, you should take that one! We could be proper zombie twins!"

"Yeah... No," I answered. I think I'll pretend I never saw that one. Whatever happened upstairs was nothing to do with me. Nothing at all. I was never there.

Available class: Chilopoda kin (Rare)

You have somehow convinced a nest of chilopoda to accept you as their kin. Why you did such a strange thing doesn't matter; it's still an achievement that's more than worthy of being awarded with a rare class. Unlock requirements: Be accepted as part of a chilopoda swarm consisting of more than a thousand individuals.

Class features: Gain chitinous skin. Gain shape-shift as a free skill, with available forms linked to the members of your swarm.

Skill domain: Special

Hah. That wasn't anything I did; their big boss told them to treat me that way! "Next one is chilopoda kin," I said, reading out the text.

"If that shape-shift skill let you turn into the big-arse centipede, that would be awesome!" exclaimed my upside-down twin. "Unlikely though."

"Yeah, I agree. Also, two legs is the correct amount of legs, and my skin is fine as it is."

Available class: Shrine maiden (Rare)

You have acted as a caretaker to the shrines of the Goddess, defending those that are under attack and repairing those that have been desecrated. But the forces that seek to defile the holy places are endless, as is your task. This class will aid you in your blessed work.

Unlock requirements: Repair 3 damaged shrines.

Class features: You can hear the cries of any damaged shrine in the area, or those that are under attack. You can repair shrines using your own mana instead of requiring a mana crystal as an intermediary.

Skill domain: Special

Hmm? A rare class that didn't immediately ring any alarm bells? It was a bit too specialised for me to want to take, and it would be nice if I could use it to locate all shrines instead of just the ones in trouble, but otherwise it looked okay. I read out the details.

"You're lacking imagination," said the other me. "You're assuming it would tell you the location of damaged shrines, when you'd probably just hear screaming. At all times. Have fun with that."

Well, I wasn't going to take it anyway, but she raised a valid point. The ambiguity was dangerous.

Available class: Aberrant monster tamer (Rare)

The path of the monster tamer is uncommon, but not unheard of. Monsters can fulfil a multitude of jobs, from assassin or guard to maid or blacksmith, if you find an appropriate species and successfully bend them to your will. You, however, have chosen a different path. You have fed an angelica vorax with your own flesh, willingly bore the young of a chilopoda sagacitas, welcomed the kiss of an aranea regina, and even offered your servitude to the undead blight. To an outside observer, it might appear as if the monsters have tamed you instead, or as if you were a monster yourself. They may not be completely wrong, but the choice was your own. You knew full well the benefits to yourself for each action you took; you simply don't see the need to deprive monsters of their freedom or lives to seize those benefits, willing to pay an alternate price, however costly, instead. This class will grant you a portion of the power of these monsters, despite you not bringing them under your control.

Unlock requirements: Strike a mutually beneficial deal with a wild sapient monster. Receive benefits from a wild non-sapient monster while offering it something it desired in return. Aid a monster of your own free will.

Class features: Gain a part of the ability of any monster species with which you have a friendly relationship. Skill selection based on monster relationships.

Skill domain: Special

Oh? Another rare class that wasn't obviously negative? It was a shame it wasn't specific about the monster abilities I'd get, though; given the monsters I'd dealt non-fatally with, it had the potential to be horrifically powerful. From the description, it might even include the giant centipede, even though I murdered him. Would I get his mind magic powers? That would make this class worth it all on its own. Alternatively, it might not give me anything for encounters prior to taking the class. What were the chances of befriending more monsters?

"This one is interesting," I said, reading out the details.

"Hah, servitude to the undead blight. Think that was from you letting me put a slave collar on you? That hardly counts; you could take it off any time! Speaking of which..."

If it was, then the training session was more useful than I'd thought. Not that I'd let that shorten her punishment. "No, you're staying there until you learn your lesson."

"I'm supposed to be the evil twin, dammit. We can't both be! And unlike you, I can't item box it off. This is unfair!"

"So you say, but I know full well you're capable of pouring mana into it to seize control, and I haven't ordered you not to."

That comment got me treated to a rather pointed upside-down glare.

Anyway, that was all of my classes. I'd spent most of the time thinking it was between assassin or mind mage, but aberrant monster tamer was interesting. I could be fairly sure what sort of direction the assassin or mind mages classes would take me in, but tamer was a gamble. While the class features of the rare classes were all powerful, they weren't always beneficial, and often came with horrific side effects. Picking that class would be taking a big risk. It could screw me over as easily as it could aid me.

So, the choice was between the safe, or the unknown. When picking my first class, I'd refused to gamble. I had been different back then. Saner, for a start. The old me would have refused to pick the class out of fear of its side effects. The current me didn't mind as much, particularly now that I was sharing a room with an undead version of myself. What could happen that would be worse than *that*? Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Secondary class set to aberrant monster tamer

For forging a symbiotic relationship with an angelica vorax, your bodily fluids gain paralytic and numbing properties, as well as improved taste and aroma.

For crawling your way into a chilopoda swarm, your skin takes on some of the properties of their chitin.

For successfully dealing with an aranea regina and making extensive use of her webs, your body develops silk glands and spinnerets.

For forging a friendly relationship with a sapient blighted husk, your eyes gain the ability to perceive true darkness.

A sudden, intense itch spanning my entire body, combined with a very unpleasant sensation on my rear, accompanied my realisation that I may have just screwed up. Stripping off my armour, I was happy to find my skin was approximately the correct colour, merely looking as if I'd suddenly overdosed on a cheap tanning spray, and that the texture wasn't obviously changed. It did seem rather less supple when

poked, but I could live with that.

"Why did you strip?" came the voice I didn't want to hear. "Hey, your eyes have turned yellow! And what's that thing on your bum?!"

What an utter idiot I was... I *knew* all rare classes were horrific traps, and yet for some reason I picked one anyway! In retrospect, perhaps I should have put more weight on that bit of the description that said that people wouldn't be entirely wrong to call me a monster myself.

Chapter 3: Maze

"All I did was laugh hysterically at you for half an hour! This is cruel and unusual punishment!"

"One more word out of you, and I'll do your face too."

"Aww, is the little spider girl embarresmf."

I left my evil twin webbed to the wall as I explored my body more carefully. I could no longer cut my skin with a spider claw without invoking the damage increasing feature of my dagger skill. The sword of paralysis could manage it easily enough, though, so my skin wasn't *that* tough. It was a decent and welcome extra layer of protection, but was more on the level of the smaller centipedes than the big one. That made sense; I'd murdered him, so it must be the little ones that I was considered to have a friendly relationship with by my class. Useful, but I wouldn't be obsoleting my usual armour set anytime soon.

The spinneret on my bum seemed to be there mostly for embarrassment purposes. The actually useful ones were on my fingertips, and were remarkably easy to use. Apparently, I had an unlimited supply of silk now. I could make threads with individual fingers or use my whole hand at once for wider bands. In terms of strength, it wasn't anywhere close to the level of what the spider queen produced, but even so, it would be useful. Then maybe the toughness of my skin wasn't because I'd murdered the big centipede, but just because the perks I got were weaker than the monsters they came from? In that case, where were my mind-fuckery powers?

As for my bodily fluids, my saliva, blood and even urine smelt every bit as tempting as the murder tree's nectar. Presumably they didn't have the hypnotic effect that the real stuff had, but without anything here that was vulnerable to it, I couldn't check for certain. Nevertheless, next time my zombie twin launched a kissing attack, I had a means of counterattack. And any vampires who happened to bite me were in for a nasty shock. As for pissing on enemies... No thanks. I'd rather stab them.

Other bodily fluids? *What* other bodily fluids? I wasn't going to experiment with that, even if they did feature improved taste. Or at least, not right now.

My dark-vision was weird. It didn't let me see in the absence of light, but rather let me see in the presence of magical darkness, such as that given off by the blighted moss on my shield, or the black torches that adorned every room. I no longer needed to carry my fox-kin torch, which I returned to my item box. It was a legitimately useful perk. It was just a shame about the effect it had on my eye colour.

"And to think I was worried about my personality changes when I went home to Earth," I muttered.

"Guess I now have a potential new career option as a superhero? Or in a circus?"

A muffled sniggering came from an evil twin shaped cocoon glued to the wall. To be fair, all the perks were useful. *Very* useful, in fact, apart from the poisonous fluids. Maybe my dark sight wouldn't be useful outside of the catacombs, but here it was awesome. I could live with a few side effects. Gaining a third orifice on my lower back had just come as a bit of a shock. Thankfully, with a small adjustment to my armour so that it didn't rub against my new protrusion, I could almost pretend I hadn't suddenly turned into some sort of mutant freak.

"Right, let's see what my new skill options are."

Stronger poison: Slightly increase the potency of your body's poisons.

Hypnotic aroma: Your bodily fluids gain a weak version of the hypnotic abilities of the angelica vorax.

Exoskeleton: Develop a thin chitin exoskeleton to provide additional protection.

Luminance: Your body glows with a soft white light.

Improved silk: Slightly increases the strength of your silk.

Festering wounds: Wounds you inflict with your own nails, claws and teeth become diseased with mild blight-like symptoms.

I stared at the options. That was... not what I was expecting. I was expecting skills that aided communication, or that otherwise helped me to forge friendly relations with monsters, but they were just things that made me more monstrous! At least it implied I could bring my perks up to the levels of the monsters they came from, if I spent skill slots on them. And it confirmed I didn't have the hypnotic power of the real nectar.

I took improved silk, because that was the least offensive option, and the most likely to actually be useful. Muffled questioning grunts came from the cocoon, so I filled my duplicate in with the details, resulting in more muffled laughter.

"Glad to see you're having fun," I muttered, but to be fair, I meant it. She deserved that much. "Shall we pair of monstrous twins get to exploring, then?" I asked, slicing her free and removing her collar.

"Being cocooned like that really is pleasant," she commented. "You should try it again sometime."

I just snorted. Having two of me was really going to cause trouble; we were in danger of spending more time messing around than trying to find the missing sword. I did have more fluids that needed careful testing, after all, and they wouldn't be dangerous to a zombie; her heart had stopped long ago.

"Any other interesting locations you've found?"

"Nope. Without mapping or an immortality cheat, I haven't ventured too far. There's the dead-end room I stashed all the zombie corpses in, but aside from that, it's just a bunch of empty rooms."

"Not empty," I pointed out, poking at one of the coffins that sat in the alcoves in the wall.

"Nah, I opened a bunch of the non-smashed ones, and there's nothing in any of them. Not even any decorative skulls hanging around. I suppose the zombies had to come from somewhere, so maybe they climbed out of the coffins?"

"If the place had been here for long enough to fill up that many coffins, wouldn't we be dealing with skeletons rather than zombies?"

"Maybe the blight regenerates them?"

"Bah. Nothing about this place makes sense. I swear the Goddess is just making it all up as she goes along. Or as we go along."

"Hah. You think she'll just keep adding floors until we've been stuck here for some pre-determined amount of time?"

I paused in my step to consider that. "I really hope not..."

"We did make that comment about real quests taking years."

"Urk... Don't remind me."

As we continued to wander, slowly filling in my auto-map, it became increasingly obvious that this place was decorative. The layout made no sense, not as an actual burial ground or even as a defensive maze. The use of space was also impossible to justify; the largish rooms had at most six alcoves per wall, arranged in two rows of three, and only four on walls with exits. With only twenty-ish coffins per room,

the place was *far* bigger than it needed to be. This place was built to offer epic zombie fights, not for any sort of functional use.

"If we ever meet this goddess, I'm going to have a few complaints," said my zombie, as we entered yet another identical room, with the same set of alcoves, torches and broken coffins.

"Me too," I agreed. "This place was blatantly *built* to be blighted."

"Or else the blight changed the whole structure."

"Possible, I suppose."

Thanks to my evil twin's zombie genocide, we didn't encounter anything as we searched the area around the shrine, but as we moved further away, we started hitting occasional groups. Noises seemed to attract more, which, given their tendency to screech loudly at us on sight, meant that a lone zombie could quickly turn into a dozen. Thankfully, they were weak, tending to fall apart the moment I poked at them. Unfortunately...

Disease nullification advanced to level 27

Any wound I inflicted sprayed their black, corrupted blood everywhere, dosing me repeatedly with more blight.

Sword proficiency advanced to level 16

"We need to get back to the shrine," I said, when the latest group caused me to start coughing up dark, stinking blood. "I can't take much more of this, or you're going to end up with another sister."

"That's nice and all, but you still haven't found food or water."

I winced. Would I even be able to purge my blight infection before dying of dehydration? I might need to ask my zombie twin to kill me with extreme prejudice. She'd need to destroy my brain, at the least.

"Want me to keep looking while you rest?" asked my twin.

"No, it's best we stick together. If it comes down to it, I just have to make sure I die by decapitation or smashing my brain in, and not of the blight or anything that would leave my body intact."

I followed my map back to the shrine. Or at least, I tried to.

"That's a brick wall," pointed out my twin, knocking on it by way of evidence. It even contained the set of six alcoves and coffins in their usual places.

"It wasn't when we came this way the first time."

"Sure you're not just reading the map wrong?"

"Don't you *dare* start on my map reading skills!"

"Hah. You know our brother was right. You just never wanted to admit it."

"Not to him, and not to myself, either. But in this case, yes, I'm sure. This room should have had another exit in the right-hand wall. In fact, my map shows it as still being there, but there's a shaded line over it."

"So, this place rearranges itself when we aren't looking?"

"Apparently."

Our frustration was interrupted by a groaning from the room's single exit, as a group of three zombies entered.

"I'll take care of them," offered my zombie twin. "You hang back and concentrate on keeping your lungs on the inside."

Gah... I was doing okay at ignoring the horrible bubbling sensation in my chest, but now she'd drawn my attention to it again and made me want to cough.

Zombie Katie quickly dispatched the three intruders, while I leant against a wall and tried not to die. I'd underestimated the damn blight. Just because my disease nullification was enough to walk around with impunity now, I hadn't considered that blighted monsters would be giving me bigger doses. It wasn't as if they kept kissing me, but spilling their blood was enough to cause problems. Even from the other side of the room, I could feel the effect of the three that had just been killed.

"You still okay?" asked my twin. "Your breathing sounds rough."

"Good. It's when you can't hear it at all you need to start worrying."

I used my new spinnerets to make myself a silk mask, wrapping up my mouth and nose, and hoping it would do something to protect me, before leaving the room and trying to find my way back to the shrine. Fast travel would be far more useful if I could jump to a shrine from anywhere, although I guess that would require me to leave behind my twin.

"See? Doesn't that feel just divine against your skin?" asked my aforementioned twin, who didn't seem to be taking things at all seriously.

"For now. Less so when I cough or vomit blighted blood into it. And you realise I'm already wearing a whole silk armour set, right?"

"That's too thick and inflexible to be comfy, and has rigid plates all over the place. At least you can make more on demand now."

"True, but presumably the silk needs to come from somewhere, and I don't have food or water."

"Magic?"

I checked my bars as I made a bit more. "Oh, stamina, actually. My first stamina using skill." I hadn't noticed when I'd cocooned the annoying zombie, because I was so used to my yellow bar never changing that I'd managed to unconsciously ignore it.

We continued walking, and I had to take back what I said about this place being a poor defensive maze. I neither saw nor heard any walls sliding around, nor did a careful search of a new wall, or even a new opening, reveal any sort of mechanism or hint that anything had moved. If I didn't have my mapping skill, I'd no doubt be completely lost. Even if I'd been making paper notes, a zombie encounter could easily have caused me to lose my position, and with the identical rooms and shifting walls, I'd never have found myself again.

Thankfully, trying to work our way backwards had greatly cut down on zombie encounters, and my makeshift mask did seem to offer some protection. But no matter how hard I tried, we weren't getting any closer to the shrine.

"This isn't a maze," I stated as we hit yet another dead end.

"Could have fooled me. What is it then?"

"A trap. We're being led by our noses."

"What? You think something is controlling the floor layout in order to force us somewhere?"

"That's exactly what I think. No way in hell is this random."

"If we rest here instead, will you be able to purge your blight infection?"

"Not at my current level. Maybe if I max out disease nullification I'll be able to start fighting it off, but it still wouldn't be quick."

"Then either you suicide and leave me behind, or we spring the trap."

"Or we break down the bloody walls."

"Yeah... I'll get right on that. I think I've got some blasting charges in my pocket here."

"I still have that pickaxe in my item box," I pointed out.

"It's worth a try," she admitted with a shrug. "I'm the strongest between us, so hand it over and I'll see what I can do."

I slouched against a wall, removing my mask for a few seconds to cough up more festering blood and pus, while my zombie twin attacked a wall.

"No luck," she said, giving up and handing back the pickaxe. The wall wasn't even scratched. So that option was out then.

"If we spring the trap, I'm unlikely to survive, which will leave you on your own in hostile territory. That's... not really something I want to risk."

"You think? Haven't you noticed the way not a single one of these zombies have attacked me unless I strike first?"

"Well, yes, but if something is messing with the layout of this place to force us towards a specific location, then it's obviously intelligent."

"Then they can equally well ensure that the two of us don't meet up after your respawn."

"Fine. We'll spring the trap. Please try not to..."

I didn't get to finish my sentence due to the hand clamping over my face. "Don't you *dare* raise that flag!"

"Mmpphh," I promised, nodding.

"Good, now let's get going."

We carried on walking, while I hung back and left the zombie battles to my duplicate. Apparently, whatever was guiding us had decided to drop all pretences, because every room now had exactly two exits, leading us in very nearly a straight line.

It wasn't long before we came out in something other than the usual square rooms that were standard down here. A much larger, rectangular room with a high vaulted ceiling, and more ornate versions of the black torches lined up along the side walls. At the far end stood a throne on a raised platform, with a tarnished gold brazier on each side, again burning with black flames.

And on top of the throne sat a suit of plate armour, with a gigantic and completely impractical looking sword resting across its lap and a dull, silver crown sitting atop the helm. And it was just the armour, with no-one wearing it; with my new eyes and as intense as the magical darkness in this place was, I could see straight through the eye holes to the back of the helmet. Not that I was going to let that fool me at all.

Sense presence advanced to level 9

The thing lit up to sense presence like a Christmas tree. It was alive, and it was strong. Maybe not on the level of the centipede or the spider queen, but it was certainly a bigger signal than the starfish-wolf things. The room was so large, alas, that it was out of appraisal range.

The empty suit of armour stood up, moving slowly, and making sounds that suggested it was fighting against rusted, seized joints. It grasped at the sword, as long as the armour was tall, casually raising it and laying it across its pauldrons.

Things could have been worse. With no blood, hopefully this thing wasn't going to bleed all over me and

pump me full of even more blight. Trying to fight what was basically a big clump of metal was going to make it hard to do damage, but it seemed big and slow, and there were two of us and only one of it.

I gripped my sword and took a fighting stance, letting my sword proficiency skill guide my actions. The suit of armour just stood there, silent and unmoving. Was it going to wait for us to make the first move?

No... It was kinda hard to tell, given its lack of eyes, but from the orientation of the helmet, it didn't seem to be me that it was looking at. My zombie twin, then?

I would have turned to look, but the red, glowing sword that had just stabbed straight through my heart, delivering its paralysing curse through my whole body at once, made movement rather difficult.

I crumpled to the floor, and the last thing I saw was my zombie twin, ripping her sword out of my side where she'd stabbed straight through one of the thinner centipede plates, a twisted smile of pure ecstasy on her face as she raised her sword for another swing. It was all I could do to stash my equipment before I fell.

Chapter 4: Cliché

Curse tolerance advanced to level 5

Well... That sucked. Had she betrayed me, or was the suit of armour controlling her somehow? It didn't help that novice empath didn't respond to her, just like it hadn't responded to any zombie. I wanted to believe she was being controlled; given her—or rather, *my*—normal personality, if it was a betrayal, then she wouldn't have been able to resist the urge to make some sort of witty or cutting remark while I was dying on the ground. Then again, if it was my normal personality, I wouldn't have been able to betray me, so there was an incompatible assumption in that logic.

I'd assume controlled for now, based on the way she had plenty of opportunity to kill me, and there was no advantage to waiting for that specific moment. And she didn't appear to have done anything about my respawn; an hour would have been plenty of time to get back here to camp the shrine. Which, again, should have kept her out from the beginning if she meant me harm.

Which meant that I had to get back there, avoid being overrun by zombies, then destroy a suit of metallic armour while avoiding attacks from a zombie that was far stronger and faster than me, and who I didn't want to hurt. Possibly a second zombie version of me, too, although having my heart stabbed out certainly didn't qualify as leaving my corpse undamaged, so hopefully it wouldn't be another self-aware one. That sounded so far beyond my abilities that I rated the chance of success as only slightly higher than slaying the dragon.

Checking out of interest, the top floor shrine was indeed still active. The temple shrine had gone dark again, and my original respawn cave was still out. I could actually go and visit the dragon, should I desire. But I didn't; levelling my heat tolerance wouldn't help me here. Besides, there might be fox-kin up there after revenge for me blighting their town.

Actually, that raised another interesting possibility. The loss of the temple shrine suggested something bad had happened there. Could I return to the town and loot the place? My class unlock requirements confirmed I'd infected over a thousand, but only that I'd killed over a hundred. In fact, the infected might not even be fox-kin at all; it could just as easily have been a swarm of beetles we happened to pass while I was knocked out. Or perhaps they had been cured. It only said they were infected, not that they had succumbed to the infection, and I knew the fox-kin didn't seem able to repair shrines on their own. Using class unlock requirements as a form of scrying would be a seriously cool abuse of my blessing, but I had my doubts as to the reliability.

I'd make an attempt at rescuing my zombie twin, and if that didn't work, I'd check out the fox-kin town for extra resources. Assuming the shifting maze would let me back upstairs.

I wrapped a new mask around my face and stepped once more out of the safety of the shrine room, and into the blight filled air. Actually, given that my body was reset each time, how come I'd respawned with my new monstrous features intact? Shouldn't they need to regrow each time? Guess I'll file that one under the same category as me keeping my memories.

Disease nullification advanced to level 28

Almost at the maximum, and I was still far away from being able to ignore the blight. My only hope would be an evolution, but so far I'd not managed to evolve any skill above tier three.

Now that I was alone, I concentrated on sneaking, doing my best to decapitate zombies with minimal mess and noise, avoiding big fights or getting myself sprayed with infected blood. The passageways had shifted again, which I suppose was fortunate, or else the shrine would presumably have been cut off from the throne room. Alas, it did mean that there was a new batch of zombies around. Just how many were down here in total? There must be thousands of the things.

Could be worse, I suppose; they could be as numerous and densely packed as the centipedes.

Novice stealth advanced to level 10

Proficient dodger advanced to level 16

No evolution for sneaking. A pity, but I suppose I'd never successfully hidden from anything particularly scary.

A couple of rooms away from the throne room, I checked it out with sense presence. I could only pick up one, but my zombie twin hadn't been visible to it to begin with. A surprise, given her obvious strength, and a pain now that I wanted to know where she was. Nothing for it, I thought, so I walked in.

She was standing behind the throne, her tattoos spread across her full face, and the sclera of her left eye now as black as the right one. The inhuman grin was still on her face, and if anything, only grew as she turned to face me.

The animated armour was back on the throne, as it had been on my first visit. My second corpse was... not looking good. It hadn't reanimated, but the head had been sliced open, and the brain was missing.

"Seriously?" I asked my evil twin as she walked towards me, sword and shield in hand. "Brains? Decided to lean into the stereotype?"

"If you have to blame someone, blame yourself for being so tasty," she answered, licking her lips.

"Oh? You can still speak?"

"Of course. What's your problem, anyway? You let the tree and spider queen eat you. Why not me?"

"That's different. They didn't stab me in the back! Well, side."

"They kinda did, actually. The spider queen tortured you for killing her kids, and the tree blatantly murdered you the first time around."

"You... What the heck did that rusty pile of armour do to you?"

"Nothing really. Just reminded me of what I really wanted from life: good food. I know you agree; at one point you were planning to rob the fox-kin town to get some supplies, and you almost took the flame mage class just so you could cook."

Well, yes, but that was robbing other people, not other people robbing me. And they started the fight! It was completely different! Bah... I felt like I definitely had the moral high ground here, yet I couldn't find any way of wording 'that was different' that didn't make me sound like an arse. Fine, if she could speak, time to improvise.

"Let me make you a deal, then. Help me trash that rust-bucket, and I'll give you three of my brains."

"Why would I trade for what I can just take? No, don't answer that. No doubt you're thinking that you won't come back until you're strong enough to beat me, so I'd only get one. And I'd end up dead. Well, all I need to do is camp the shrine, and I can take as many as I like. In fact, why didn't I do that this time?"

Crap... Ah well, they couldn't all go as well as the spider queen. Perhaps I'd need to use the upstairs shrine sooner rather than later. But why did she wait here for me? Even if she couldn't get into the shrine anymore, she could have waited outside it. Best case, proximity to whatever the thing is on the throne was needed to keep her drooling over my brains.

One way to find out. I turned and ran.

But not very far, on account of the way that where the exit of the throne room had previously been, there was now a wall. Damn.

The footsteps approaching from behind informed me that my zombie twin had broken into a run, so I turned back, heavy shield ready to block. At least this time my blight infection was mild, so I wasn't risking creating another intelligent clone. Even less so, if she scooped my brains out again afterwards.

Throughout all this, the damn set of haunted armour hadn't even moved. Despite still shining to sense presence, it looked completely inanimate.

As expected, the battle went poorly. I already knew the zombie version of me was far stronger than I was from our earlier sparring, and it would take more than a few skill levels to make up the difference. I couldn't get any cuts in with my sword of paralysis. I had my webs, but I couldn't fire out ready formed nets, and there was no way I could bind her while she was resisting. I had the collars, but I knew she could fight them if she wanted, and she wasn't giving me an opportunity to attach one anyway. I had my paralytic fluids, but how would I get her to drink enough of them? She seemed to have been manipulated into finding me tasty, so would the alluring scent be enough even without the real nectar's hypnotic effects? But I kinda needed my blood, and enough to affect her would leave me rather short. Bah, I should have stockpiled urine in my item box...

Now there's a sentence I never thought I'd hear myself think.

There were no opportunities to break away from combat to charge the boss sitting on its throne, and it wasn't long before my zombie twin started getting in good hits, shattering the thinner centipede plates and cutting into the silk. With the force of the blows reduced by my armour, my toughened skin was enough to prevent her cutting me, but at this rate it wouldn't be long until I had no armour left.

There didn't seem much point in suiciding, given that she was trying to kill me and not capture. What else could I try? What if I focused this fight on making things easier for next time.

I stored my sword, shield and armour, just as she launched a swing, and her sword carved through my side, slicing open my chest and cutting deep into a lung. Then I grabbed it and invoked item box. I wasn't certain it would work, given that it seemed to effectively be a part of her, but my gamble paid off and the sword flashed out of existence.

I reached for her shield, but she leapt backwards, and I was in no condition to follow. How could I die and be absolutely certain I didn't give rise to another zombie? I wasn't certain I could decapitate myself in one strike, and even if I did, I wouldn't be able to store the weapon I used to do it in my item box again afterwards.

"Give it back!!!!" screamed the intelligent zombie.

I'd have liked to make some sort of reply, but I was in no condition to do that either. I once again crumpled to the floor, blood pooling around me, and hoped that my zombie twin would either eat my

brain or, in her anger, do enough damage to my corpse that it wouldn't rise again.

Sword proficiency advanced to level 17

Proficient blocker advanced to level 18

Evolution conditions met: Novice parrier ranks up to proficient parrier

It is commonly said that a good offence is the best defence. Using a weapon to defend with isn't quite what the originator of this phrase had in mind, but it's close enough. You have crossed swords with a powerful undead and lived to tell the tale, earning you this upgrade from novice to proficient. This skill aids you in parrying and deflecting blows with any weapon.

Proficient parrier advanced to level 11

A good crop of skill gains. Once again, I'd had a skill tier up for surviving a death. More importantly though, I hurriedly looked around the shrine where I'd respawned, still in the catacombs for now, and as expected, saw no sign of my zombie twin. Looked like the manipulative suit of armour really wouldn't let her out of its room.

Something else I saw no sign of, that was rather more unexpected, was an exit. All four walls around the shrine were sealed. Damn. Thank goodness I could still travel back to the top floor, but what the heck was I supposed to do now?

Chapter 5: Failure

I held my hand against the statue and invoked fast travel, jumping to the top floor. Sense presence picked up nothing in the room with me, and a glance around revealed nothing suspicious. Apparently, it was no longer being watched.

I took a more careful look around and saw nothing I recognised as having moved since the last time I'd been here. I could still pick up the dragon over in his cavern, too. My original respawn cave and pet murder tree's cavern were far out of range, so while I couldn't sense the warrior commander, that wasn't enough to claim he wasn't still here. I could pick up some of the closer star-wolves, but beyond that, there was nothing. It seemed that upstairs was still safe.

First off, I went to gather more of the spider queen's webs. Even if they were her no-effort inferior product, they were still far better than anything I could make, and my armour needed patching up. And no doubt would need more patching in the future. Next, I went to visit the centipedes, gathering up more shell segments, both thick and thin. With my new, much larger item box, I could afford to stockpile.

And it really was *much* larger. It didn't have any sort of fullness gauge, and I wouldn't know it was full until it refused to let me add anything more, but there were several panthers caught in the webs again, and after killing them, I found I could store the entire corpses. *All* of them. I couldn't store the giant centipede though, so there was *some* limit. Nevertheless, it was a big one, and I could stockpile food, resources, and equipment with impunity. I even kept the panther corpses in case I ever had the chance to cook them.

Resources gathered, I made my armour repairs.

Improvisational artisan advanced to level 13

With my newfangled, supersized item box, I should pack more water too, so I made my way to the brook, keeping watch for the warrior leader. Was he even still here? It took me a few attempts to produce waterproof bags using my own silk, leaving me wishing I could handle the stuff with the same fidelity as the real spiders, but I got there in the end. Perhaps the one on my bum was better in some way? No, even if it was, I was just going to pretend that one didn't exist. Whatever I could do with my hands would have to be good enough.

I still wanted some rigid containers, and I had a couple of canteens I'd looted from the fox-kin mines, but they only stored around a litre each. I could do a bit of reinforcement of my bags by threading bits of shell

into them, but they were still a bit squishy, and didn't have lids.

Actually, given that my item box now stopped time, I should take bags full of the centipede's hardening fluid too, if it was still good. It should remain liquid in my item box. It involved a bit of backtracking, but I was sure I'd find a use for it later.

Liquid supplies restocked, I risked checking out my old respawn area. How was I supposed to sneak in such a way as to hide myself from anyone with a sense presence type ability? The last time, the commander had been able to detect me the moment I set foot outside my respawn cave. No matter how carefully or quietly I tread, it wasn't going to prevent that. I couldn't pick him up now though, even when standing right by the crevice. I crept in, only to find a pile of rubble a few metres down the passageway. So, he'd collapsed it all, then. What a pain. I wouldn't be able to reach my pet murder tree, assuming he hadn't collapsed that chamber too.

Luckily, with my new abilities, there was nothing left behind in the tree's room that I needed. Everything there could be reproduced within minutes, aside from some beetle and spider materials that I no longer had any need for.

Next up was a visit to the cliff, to get a view of the floor below, and what I saw was beyond anything I'd expected. The town was gone completely, with no lights at all in the area. Near where the town had been were occasional patches of unnatural darkness visible to my dark-vision, not merely an absence of light, but straight out the other side into whatever magical phenomenon lay beyond. My best guess was that they were blighted copses of crystal trees. There were no lights around them, so presumably an attempt had been made to stem the spread by clearing more of the crystal trees to build some sort of firebreak.

That had the implication that despite the loss of the town, there was something down there alive and intelligent enough to understand a firebreak was needed, and build one. Was that fox-kin that had fled the town? Was it something else? Oh, *please* don't be the spider queen... She had been pissed at me already, so I *really* didn't want to meet her now, having blighted her food supply...

I noted that there were none of the patches of darkness to the left of the town. According to my map, there was a particularly extensive mine shaft in that area. Had they evacuated there? Another area to add to my places to avoid list, then.

Wanting to avoid the spider queen, I took the passage down instead. If they'd lost the whole town, surely they wouldn't have enough manpower to keep their checkpoint manned? Alas, while my assumption was correct, that didn't mean they'd left the door open. Thankfully, with no-one guarding it, I had as much time as I needed to demolish the wall with my pickaxe. It took longer than I'd have expected, possibly enchanted or something, but at least it wasn't completely indestructible, like the catacomb walls seemed to be.

I stepped through the hole, and found to my disappointment that the cannons that had been there were gone, as was anything else that may have been worth looting. I was considering having a play with those cannons in case they could penetrate the catacomb walls. After being trapped in the shrine room, it had become obvious that I needed some way to break through them, or I wouldn't even get another shot at the boss that I assumed was controlling the area.

And even that was an assumption; I still hadn't had a chance to appraise it. The one in actual control could have been anywhere.

I made my way to the town, avoiding any patches of trees, blighted or otherwise, only to find that it simply wasn't there. What *was* there was a sizeable crater. How was I supposed to loot a crater?! Was the staircase down still intact? Was *anything*? What about Ja'yakril's house? It had been outside of the walls, while whatever had destroyed the town had hit the inside, so maybe it had been protected some small amount. Obviously not a *lot*, because if it was still upright I'd be able to see it, but maybe it hadn't been

completely obliterated?

I made my way to where my map indicated the house had been, and then walked away from the blast location, treading around debris and utilising sense mana to locate anything of interest.

Sense mana advanced to level 7

There was actually something there! I started shifting a pile of rubble, digging up a small box. It was full of tiny things that looked very much like mana crystals. And the reason they looked like mana crystals was because they were, or so claimed my appraisal skill. They were titchy though, and to sense mana were nowhere near as bright as the others I'd seen. I'd be willing to bet they weren't worth a hundred mana.

Even if they were worth thousands, I doubted I could use them to repair the temple shrine... Was it possible to build a shrine from scratch?

I continued my search, in the hopes of finding something more, but nothing else lit up to sense mana. There might be more mundane things under there, but it was hardly practical to search everything.

That was a disappointing result, but given the state of the town, not a surprising one. My next job would be a search of where the temple used to be, to see if I could find any remains of the shrine or the staircase. I turned around to begin the walk.

Only to find a fox-kin in front of me.

Sense presence wasn't responding, which was presumably why I'd completely missed his approach, but one look at his face was enough to tell me that was because he was blocking it, and not because he was weak. Besides, novice empath was telling me nothing either. Not that I needed it to see the utter hatred in his expression. What about appraisal?

Mru'walyn, vulpes sagax
Detailed appraisal blocked

Mru? Now that I got a good look at his face, I could easily believe he was one of the three at the front in that courthouse style place. So, following what I knew of their naming scheme, this was the leader of the mage caste?

"What do you want?" I asked dejectedly, activating trigger respawn. "I do my best to avoid you, yet you insist on interfering, over and over and over, regardless of the way it never ends well. Can't you just pretend I don't exist or something?"

"You murder more than three thousand people, and expect us to just ignore you?" he answered. "And don't give me any bullshit about us taking you after you were infected and carelessly bringing you into the town. We know full well you deliberately pulled an infected shield out of the subspace storage ability you use and infected both yourself and the one carrying you. No doubt you were hoping to spread enough chaos to escape."

Drat. Another intelligent one. "So, you admit kidnapping?"

"No, I admit using reasonable force to bring you to trial, after you caused a conflict that decimated the fighting force of our settlement. But the evidence we had was already pointing at you not being at fault. Had you simply cooperated, your safety would have been assured. But that no longer matters. You will be returning with me, whether you want to or not, and I will have you make up for the damage you've caused by saving the rest of us."

"The hell? You expected me to cooperate with you after my first visit resulted in someone trying to stick a slave collar on me, and my second visit had me tortured?! You expected me to believe another attempt would be any different?"

Not to mention how close his phrasing of 'your safety would have been assured' was to Ja'yakril's reassurances when he was trying to slave-collar me. It was not at all the same as saying 'you would have been free to go'.

"The perpetrators of those events were killed. I believe you witnessed their heads outside our town. But it matters little. I merely wanted to speak to you while I had the chance, to see if you would at least offer an apology for the dead. It seems you have no regrets over your actions. And I see from your appearance that you decided to throw off some of your veneer of people-hood, too. **Sleep.**"

Curse tolerance advanced to level 6

I looked around in confusion, only to find that I was back in the catacombs. Alarmed, I performed a quick emergency check, which revealed that there was still no-one here and that there were still no exits. With that settled, I returned to the most important question; how had I just got here? The last thing I remembered... The arch-mage had hit me with a sleep spell. Thank goodness I'd activated trigger respawn beforehand. No, thank goodness he'd felt the need to brag at me beforehand! If he had hit me with that from behind, rather than waiting for me to turn around...

Right, apparently I need to keep trigger respawn active at all times when traversing fox-kin territory from now on.

It still left the question open of what they had done while I slept. I was still wearing my armour, and aside from my item box, there was no way it could be removed without damaging it, so I doubt they mistreated my body. Were they just waiting for me to wake up? No... The last thing he said to me, about talking while he had the chance. They intended to keep me asleep *forever*. Would my resistance have eventually saved me? Would I have died of old age? How would I know if I had? He could block my other skills. What if he blocked trigger respawn too? Had I just skipped seventy years?

What if it wasn't just sleep? What if they had some sort of temporal stasis, like my item box? Wouldn't that stop trigger respawn even if it was active and unblockable? Dying after an hour wouldn't help if an hour never passed from my perspective.

Once again, I was thankful for friend of fear letting me think things through calmly and rationally. On the balance of probability, it was unlikely they blocked trigger respawn, simply because they hadn't had knowledge of it. That may have changed now, though, having watched me die for no reason while asleep.

I'd once told Mi'taan that I had an average lifespan of a day, and hadn't clarified that was because things kept killing me. The best-case scenario was that they assumed I'd died of old age. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the first time I'd died suddenly. Also, the armour I was wearing would have suddenly vanished, despite me being unconscious. Next best scenario would be if no-one had been actively watching me, and they thought I'd woken up. But that was unlikely, too.

I've never measured the respawn time precisely. Was it *exactly* an hour? Or close enough that he may have picked up on the timespan between meeting me and my sleeping body's death? Did he notice that it matched the time lag between when the warrior commander attacked the temple and my alleged murder? Or my capture at the upstairs shrine and my supposed death from blight? I had to assume that they had not only worked out trigger respawn, but had also uncovered the possibility that I faked those deaths. Maybe they would think it was something that activated automatically if I was incapacitated, rather than something I needed to trigger manually?

And it wasn't just trigger respawn... The spider queen had released that priestess, and I'd told her about my resistance abilities. I needed to assume they knew that, too. Her information would have let them know that the spider queen had been able to keep me paralysed the whole time, and only needed to increase the frequency of my doses of poison to compensate, so they wouldn't think things were so important that they couldn't leave me sleeping for an hour, but it meant they would plan for me becoming

progressively more resistant to whatever they used to send me to sleep.

That trip had been a disaster. I'd not found anything that would help me move around this maze, and I'd leaked vital information to the fox-kin. Admittedly, there wasn't anything I could have done to avoid it, but that didn't change the fact that I was now terrified of travelling upstairs.

I'd gone from the high of having another copy of myself to mess around and enjoy my time with, with the two of us seemingly undefeatable by the monsters on this floor, to trapped, alone, helpless and afraid. What was I supposed to do now?

His sleep spell had levelled curse resistance. I could start by training that resistance further. I drew my sword of paralysis from my item box and began to cut.

Chapter 6: Visitors

Evolution conditions met: Curse tolerance ranks up to curse resistance

Not all magical attacks aim to deliver raw damage. Sleep, weakness or paralysis are common effects.

Having quickly recovered from the sleep magic of a powerful mage, you have earned this upgrade from tolerance to resistance. This skill will aid you in rejecting the negative effects of curses.

The message didn't directly reference surviving, but I knew full well that I only 'quickly recovered' on account of my death.

My sword had stopped levelling it at level twelve, at which point I brought out my zombie twin's special demonic edition sword and started again. It was a better blade than my original sword, but was one that I wouldn't want to wield around anything I didn't want to corrupt.

Blighted demonite longsword of paralysis

This high-quality demonite longsword has been enchanted with a paralysis effect and infested by blight. Successive attacks will progressively weaken the target, eventually leading to muscle failure. They will also infect the target with blight. This item is bonded to Katie, as much a part of her as any limb, and cannot be wielded by anyone else.

Attack rating: 40

It was a shame it didn't explain exactly what it meant by bonded. Would my zombie twin know where it was at all times? Did it have anything to do with the way I hadn't been able to appraise it while it was still in her possession, and I only got her appraisal results instead? It was supposed to only be wieldable by her, yet I could use it. Was that because we're the same person?

The small amounts of blight it struck me with weren't enough to level my disease nullification, given that I ended up too badly paralysed to continue cutting myself before picking up a significant infection, but it got me a couple more levels of curse resistance. Level fourteen. Somehow I doubted it would be enough to defend against the fox-kin arch-mage. I hadn't been able to read him with sense presence that time, but I had in the past, and I knew he was giant centipede level. Even so, every scrap of extra defence would help.

"Look, the readings are clear. She's just through that wall."

"But we've done a complete loop around it, and there's no way in."

What? Fox-kin, *here*?! Shit, I was still paralysed! For the first time, I was thankful for being blocked in, but wouldn't whoever's controlling this place just open up a gap if he noticed those guys were hostile to me? And what readings? They had something to track me now? I took a look with sense presence, and there were *four* of them I could pick up, one of whom was giant centipede level. Had Mru'walyn come *here*?!

"Then let's just make one."

...And that voice was the first I'd recognised. The bloody *warrior commander*. Was he strong enough to cut his way through? I wasn't going to risk it, so I activated trigger respawn. Nevertheless, I was thankful. If the giant presence was him, then it wasn't Mru'walyn.

"Wait!" shouted someone, but the resounding crash that followed strongly implied that he didn't. The lack of a wall collapsing on top of me implied that he didn't succeed, at least.

"You utter fool!" yelled a female voice. "There's no way I can purify the amount of dust you just kicked up! We need to *flee*, now!"

Well, as fox-kin encounters go, that was one of the better ones. Still, from their previous reactions, I'd assumed they would never set foot down here no matter what. Not only was I wrong, but the route upstairs must still be intact despite the destruction of the temple.

As I waited for the paralysis to wear off, or more accurately, for trigger respawn to kick in, I spent more time considering the walls. If the fox-kin commander hadn't breached them, then nothing I could do would. He had kicked up dust, though. Probably obliterated the coffins, although the phrase 'kicked up' wouldn't have been my first choice for that.

...Wait.

What was I lying on? The floor wasn't brick. It wasn't soil, either, which was my excuse for not considering it before. It was smooth, carved rock. Could I tunnel through it? Did I want to make a permanent tunnel with fox-kin around, even if I could?

"I'm not lost. I'm telling you the walls are shifting! We've been blocked off from the exit."

Oh crap.

"Stop making excuses. You've obviously just made a mistake while recording our path."

"Oh, really? Then what are *they*?"

"Coffins? What's your point?"

"My point is that not ten minutes ago, you blasted them into dust."

The voices were indeed coming from the same direction as last time. So it wasn't just walls moving around then... How the heck did this maze work?

"Stop... Arguing..." came a panting voice, the same one that had complained about the dust earlier. "You have... five minutes..."

"Damn. I *said* we shouldn't risk this expedition! We can't afford the loss of one life, let alone a whole party!"

Once again, they'd come after me, and once again it wasn't going at all well for them. I hadn't even lifted a finger this time. I *couldn't*, at least on one hand; my paralysis would last until trigger respawn fired.

My voice still worked, though.

"If you can tunnel under the walls, the shrine in here keeps the room blight free. You're welcome to rest here, as long as the shrine doesn't reject you."

...I was so going to regret this. The commander was going to barge his way in, destroy the shrine again, and we'd all die together. I'd respawn one last time on the top floor, get captured by the arch-mage, and my quest would be over. But I'd recognised that last voice. It was Mi'taan. One of the few fox-kin who had been both sane and friendly towards me. Whatever insanity I'd inflicted myself with during my time here, I still wanted to maintain some shred of humanity, and I couldn't just leave him to the blight.

"Well, you heard her," said one of the unrecognised voices. "Let's start digging."

"How? There are no earth shapers here."

"Commander?"

"Why in the abyss would I follow the instructions of our enemy?"

"Because in less than five minutes, Do'lelenii's mana will run out. Five minutes after that, you'll be oozing black blood from a hundred sores as your skin starts to fall off, as well as coughing up chunks of your own lungs. And some time after that, you'll return to our camp, and the vulpes sagax will cease to exist."

"Only because she's controlling the passageways!"

"That's not me," I shouted. "It's trying to keep me trapped too."

"For... what it's worth... truth..." stammered the one I assumed to be Do'lelenii.

"It's not worth shit. We've known she can fool your truthsense since the beginning."

"As another for what it's worth, the control lines are heading off in that direction," said Mi'taan, presumably pointing somewhere. He could see how the walls were controlled? "Which is the opposite direction from the room Katie is in. Now, dig us a tunnel or die of blight, along with us all. Take your pick."

I heard a series of bangs from outside, so presumably he'd chosen to cooperate. I was hoping he wouldn't, so I could at least reassure myself that I'd tried to save them, without having a fox-kin search party assaulting the shrine.

Using my one good arm, I dragged myself to the statue. In the worst case, I could fast travel to the upstairs shrine, although that was a big risk in itself. I only had a few minutes left on trigger respawn, too, so that would be fun with fox-kin in the room. Should I spawn here or upstairs? The known invaders here, against an unknown potential trap above.

Another bang caused a cloud of dust next to one of the walls, and the next launched a burst of jagged lumps of stone into the air. Mi'taan stuck his head through the hole and climbed in.

"Long time no see," I called. "Forgive me for sitting down, but I'm dying again. I'll be back to full health in a few minutes. You get to be the second group to watch me switch bodies."

"Those are some nasty cuts," he said as the second fox-kin pulled himself in. Someone I didn't recognise, but that appraisal told me was from the warrior caste, and called So'ballash. "What did you fight?"

I answered by briefly summoning my new demonic sword. "Forgive me for not keeping it out, but it's blighted."

"Look at her eyes!" exclaimed So'ballash. "Just like Mru'walyn said. She's one of them!"

"She is... clean..." panted the next one up, wearing the robes of a high priestess. She must be Do'lelenii.

"So is... the room..." She didn't even stand up, worming her way out of the hole on her stomach, then doing a half roll onto her back.

"These eyes were my reward for repairing this shrine," I said. "Rather handy for being able to see down here."

The fourth was another mage, one I'd not seen before. Appraisal identified him as Mo'teckit. "A reward?" he asked incredulously. From his voice, this was the one who was talking about readings, but I didn't see him carrying any suspicious items that looked like they might have been used to track me.

"Yes, reward," I answered. "And I really can't be arsed to explain the details."

The final one through was Sru'taklin, the warrior commander.

"Why in the hells is the barrier letting *you* through?" I asked, now the incredulous one.

"Because he's been sworn not to attack you, only capture you," said Do'lelenii, rapidly recovering now that she wasn't doing whatever she had previously been doing to defend their party from blight.

Novice empath advanced to level 7

Yeah, didn't really need that. His face was enough. How he was resisting the urge to stomp over and drive his fist straight through my face, I had no idea.

"Did you ever figure out what So'layn was up to?" I asked, on the off chance they'd answer.

"No-one was up to anything," growled the commander. "We were simply doing our duty."

"I honestly believe that was true of you, and even Si'janrii and Si'chieen. Not So'layn though."

"And what do you mean by that? When you deluded Do'myrith into bringing you through our walls, his report matched Si'chieen exactly."

"I know. So imagine my surprise when, in your torture chamber, it turned out that he believed every word I'd said. After my death there, I was hoping he'd be questioned, but that overly impulsive arch-priestess went and spoilt it by killing him without giving him a chance to speak."

"You dare to denigrate one of my captains, one who has already lost his life in the line of duty?!"

Wow... That was a surprising response. Who knew this big guy could use a word like denigrate in a sentence? "I'm not going to argue. I was just wondering if you'd found anything. No chance of it now, if you haven't. Anyway, it's time for me to die again. Be right back."

Trigger respawn kicked in, and I found myself staring at the ceiling in front of the statue, as my previous body toppled over forward on top of me from its sitting position. At least I wasn't wearing spiky armour this time, so it didn't cause so much of a mess as the last time that happened. I shoved it off and stood back up. "Yay, functional legs again."

All five fox-kin were staring, slack-jawed. Even the priestess, who was still on her back, neck twisted at an odd angle in order to see me.

"What?" I asked. "You already know I do that. What are you all staring at?"

"You... You..." stammered the commander.

What? Did I just miss something? I suppose I've never seen my respawn process from the outside, being dead and all, so maybe it looked surprising in some way? The only other fox-kin to have seen it were the two mages in the temple, and they'd seemed rather shocked too. My zombie twin had seen it plenty of times though, and she'd never mentioned anything.

Mi'taan burst out laughing, stumbling backward until he was resting against a wall. Do'lelenii closed her eyes and smiled. So'ballash had frozen in place, and was in danger of drooling if he didn't pick his jaw up soon.

Mo'teckit recovered more quickly, and a look of determination set on his face as he drew a dagger and threw it at me. The barrier didn't react, either to him or to the dagger already in flight. Without time to dodge, I invoked item box to equip my armour, and summoned my shield in its path. Perhaps that was overkill, but given everyone's exaggerated reactions, I was risking nothing. Obviously, *something* he had just seen had spurred him to attack.

The dagger struck the shield, and despite bouncing off apparently harmlessly, I was assaulted by pain that made my time with the spider queen feel like a gentle tickle, leaving me writhing on the floor.

The commander reacted instantly, but much to my surprise, didn't move on me at all, instead spinning around and planting his fist straight into the face of the mage, his head exploding like a watermelon. That was another one that no-one would be able to question, then.

Not that I was in any position to complain. I reached out to activate trigger respawn again, but the attempt did nothing but redouble my pain, leaving me screaming and wondering how the hell I was still conscious.

Chapter 7: Helpless

As I lay screaming and squirming on the ground, insensate to all around me and with no idea how long I'd been in that condition, the pain abruptly lessened.

Evolution conditions met: Pain nullification ranks up to pain immunity

Pain is essential for letting you know when you're injured, when something is wrong, or simply when you've pushed yourself too far and it's time to stop. At least in small doses. Sometimes you already know exactly what's wrong, in which case the pain is nothing more than a distraction. You have experienced far too much pain in your short life, having had limbs ripped off and the wounds agitated, suffered an internally injected dose of aranea volito venom, been consumed from the inside out, been melted by a dragon, spent time in a vulpes sagax torture chamber and experienced your soul itself being violently shredded. For surviving such traumatising experiences, albeit after having your personality corroded as a result, your nullification has been upgraded to immunity. This skill grants almost complete immunity to pain, allowing through only what you need to be aware of your surroundings, with only the worst of afflictions able to penetrate your defences.

New skill gained: Soul magic tolerance

There are no classes of magic more insidious than soul magic, whose effects can extend even beyond death. While users are routinely hunted down and executed in almost all civilised lands, there are always a few evil beings who escape the net. This skill offers a small amount of protection, should outside influences attempt to interfere with your soul.

Hah. So, when the mind magic description said something about few classes of magic being more insidious, this one says there are none. Guess I've found the top of the pile. Or more accurately, the bottom. The thought made me laugh. Or attempt to laugh, anyway; the action caused the pain to flare up once more. Stupid badly named skills. In what way was I immune to pain?

"Hey, Katie! Can you hear me?"

Yes, but I couldn't speak. Mi'taan was looming over me, the priestess Do'lelenii behind him.

"I still don't see why we can't bring her back upstairs," I heard So'ballash mutter.

"Because there's no way anyone other than Mru'walyn enchanted that dagger, as I've already said," answered Mi'taan. Had he? I hadn't noticed. Must have been while I was busy screaming. "No-one else can use spatial magic like that. We've been lied to. Whatever mission Mo'teckit was on, it wasn't the same as ours."

Spatial magic? But I'd been hit with soul magic?

"Then what? You want to stay down here forever?"

"Just until she comes around."

"It's been hours. You've watched her die twice already. I imagine the only reason she's stopped screaming is because her mind finally broke."

What? *Hours*? And I died? *Twice*?! And respawning didn't fix this?!

I lay completely still on the ground. Any effort to move, from speaking to twitching my little finger, caused unbearable pain.

"No, my healing may have done nothing, but she is improving on her own," said Do'lelenii. "In any case, it will be several more hours until I have fully recovered my mana. It will not be safe to attempt to leave this place before then. We don't know how many walls commander Sru'taklin will need to tunnel under to reach the exit."

"We'd have been ready sooner if you didn't waste your mana by trying to heal her," So'ballash continued to mutter.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 2

Yes, please. More of them. Many, many more.

I twitched my fingers, happy to find that doing so no longer caused unbearable agony. Only the marginally more manageable bearable kind.

"Hey, if you can hear me, blink twice," Mi'taan tried.

Blinking sounded nice and easy. I could do that. I blinked twice, and then winced at the pain, which caused yet more pain, which made me wince harder, leaving me in a feedback loop of torment.

"Good, looks like you really are recovering. You were hit by an enchanted weapon which delivered some sort of shock into your body, before vanishing. The purpose seemed to be to disable you and then teleport you somewhere, but your deflection of the weapon meant that the teleportation only caught the bottom of your legs. I don't think you got the full force of whatever the disabling shock was either, but given your condition, you obviously got enough."

Wait, it *what*? The arch-mage made a dagger that would shred my soul and then teleport whatever was left over back to him? And it had caught my legs? They certainly seemed to be present and correct now, but then they did say I'd died a couple of times. So that was why he mentioned spatial magic.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 3

Doing my best to get my body back under control seemed to be triggering the levelling, so I concentrated on making progressively bigger movements without doing anything so strenuous that my body shut back down.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 4

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 5

"Are we just going to let her recover?" asked So'ballash, apparently getting fed up sometime later. "So what if Mru'walyn came up with some way of neutralising her he didn't tell us about? It didn't work, but at least it incapacitated her, so shouldn't we be taking her while we have the chance?"

Not a single member of this group was referring to me as 'it', which was nice, but So'ballash obviously wasn't a fan. Not that I particularly held it against him; rather than him, I was more surprised at the commander, who had actually tried to defend me. Where was he, anyway? I couldn't see him without turning my head, despite his looming bulk, and he wasn't speaking.

"You watched her resurrection just now. *Three times*. How can you still say that?"

"That doesn't change the fact that she destroyed our town! She killed *thousands*! I was there, at her trial. I was right behind her when she casually mentioned she had the blight, with a smile on her face, like she was telling a joke. She didn't care in the slightest about what would happen next!"

"Maybe she didn't know? It's obviously not as serious for her as it is for us."

"*Dying* isn't as serious for her as it is for us!" So'ballash hissed. "Don't ask me to believe that she thinks *everyone* is personally resurrected by the Goddess each time they die."

"You three. A moment, please. Away from her."

Oh, there's the commander. He was still here after all.

He took the other three into a corner and started whispering, far too quietly for me to pick up what he was saying. If needed, I could probably reach out to touch the statue now, which would let me use fast travel. What was he saying that he didn't want me to hear? I could at least use novice empath to get an idea of their mood.

Trying to activate the skill felt like being crushed while on fire, with a swarm of biting ants crawling over my skin. Suffice to say, I knocked it off very quickly, without learning anything.

The feedback from trying to use trigger respawn hadn't been a one off, then. As well as physical movement, my skills were currently out of use. So, no fast travel either. There I was, worrying about being kept asleep or sealed, but Mru'walyn had come up with something even worse, stripping me of my abilities and persisting across respawns. And this was the effect *after* blocking most of it! I could do nothing but hope their discussion was nothing bad.

I could hear hisses of disbelief and increasingly agitated whispers coming from the corner, but still had no idea what they were discussing. And I was stuck here, helpless.

Eventually, the four of them returned and stood over me.

"Check her," said the commander, and both Mi'taan and Do'lelenii started waving their hands around. I couldn't activate sense mana, but I felt confident they were doing magic of some sort. Checking what? Even without sense mana, I felt their spells wash through my body, powerless to do anything about it.

"Done? Okay, Do'lelenii first. Please tell me I was wrong."

"You weren't wrong."

The commander spun around and rammed his fist into the wall. Hard. "Mi'taan?" he asked without turning around.

"I concur."

"Dammit. And *So'layn* was a part of this? What have we done... What have *I* done? It's no wonder the Goddess has deserted us! And now we've let that man effectively rule over what is left!"

"Not only that," said Do'lelenii. "We let him dispose of the infected in the town. Alone and unsupervised."

The commander punched the wall again, repeatedly, while screaming.

I had no clue what was going on, but no-one seemed to be talking about dragging me back upstairs anymore, so I accepted the good luck and continued trying to get my body back under control.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 6

"Testing..." I mumbled, managing to form an intelligible, if quiet, word, without causing myself too much painful feedback.

"Katie?! You're up to talking? How are you feeling?"

"Not too..." I started, before wincing with pain, and trying again at lower volume. "Not too bad considering someone just tried to tear my soul to shreds."

"How do you know that?" demanded the commander, having started paying attention the moment I first

tried to talk.

"I assume you know that I grow resistant to classes of magic that are used on me," I whispered.

"Sometimes, for particularly significant things, I get a description of an event. That dagger gave the message, and I quote, 'experienced your soul itself being violently shredded'."

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 7

That single attack was going to get me all the way to ten at this rate. Hopefully, the evolution would help. I needed my skills back!

"I don't suppose you heard any of our conversation just now?" he asked.

"No," I answered, now able to turn the volume up a little.

I saw him glance at Do'lelenii, who gave a shallow nod.

"As if more confirmation was needed..." he muttered. "What the fuck are we supposed to do now?"

"Go upstairs and tell everyone?" suggested Mi'taan.

"Tell everyone *what*?" I was feeling seriously left out here.

"And do you think that even if every single one of us up there attacks him at once, we'll win?" asked the commander, ignoring me.

"...No."

"What are they even after?" asked the commander, turning back to me. "Katie? I don't suppose So'layn told you what his plans were?"

"Not at all. He promised to stop torturing me if I promised him my unconditional cooperation, but never said what he wanted. I assumed there was some way for him to steal my blessing, as long as I willingly gave it up."

"No. That's not possible," interjected Do'lelenii. "A blessing can never be transferred, regardless of the will of the people involved."

The commander glanced at her.

"I'll admit I can't be certain of that if soul magic was involved," she added, presumably in response. "But I still think it's unlikely."

"Then I have no other ideas, sorry. Umm... If you think it was linked to Mru'walyn, he did comment that he was going to have me save the rest of you."

"Save us? I don't suppose he went into any more detail?"

"No. He just whined for a bit, then hit me with a sleep spell. I have no idea what happened after that, because I didn't wake up until my next death."

"Wait. He *captured* you? When was this? And how long for?"

Even if they were suddenly being nice to me, there was no way I was going to accurately answer the how long for... "Yesterday? Ish? I've lost track of time, with all the unconsciousness. Which also means I have no idea how long he had me for. Could have been ages."

"*That* one was a lie," said Do'lelenii. "You may not know the exact time, but you can put an upper bound on it, and it is not 'ages'."

Damn... I blame my current condition for forgetting the priestesses can do that.

"Yeah, it wouldn't have been more than an hour. But that counts as ages to me, when my unconscious

body was in the hands of someone hostile."

"That sort of timescale would match up with that big scream he made, before he marched out and demanded we start putting a team together to find you," commented Mi'taan.

"Guess my death interrupted something then. Yay."

"You said we were the second group to watch you resurrect. Who were the first?" asked Do'lelenii.

"A pair of mages in the temple, that time they'd set up a barrier around the shrine."

"Dammit! He knew. All along, he *knew!*" yelled Mi'taan. This group of fox-kin were really not happy, and for once, it wasn't me they were unhappy with.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 8

The fact that I was still getting tolerance levels was actually incredibly disturbing. My resistance skills only resisted attacks. They didn't help to heal the resulting wounds of anything that got through. That implied that rather than attacking me and shutting down, there was still soul magic acting on me. Maybe the respawn-defying paralysis was the main point, and the shredding was a result of the imperfect application?

"This speculation is nice and all, but what, exactly, are we going to do next?" asked So'ballash, speaking up for the first time since their whispered chat. "I'll... acknowledge that maybe bringing her to Mru'walyn may not be the best of ideas. At least without checking if he really has been dabbling in forbidden magic. But we can't just stay here."

"What are you doing here in the catacombs, Katie?" asked Do'lelenii. "Is this where the holy sword you seek is hidden?"

"I don't know. I've searched the top two floors without finding it, so now I'm just working my way down. Which reminds me, Mi'taan, you seemed to be able to see the direction of whatever was controlling the floor layout. Where was it?"

He pointed in a direction that corresponded to the throne room.

"In that direction is a throne room, occupied by an animated suit of armour. And also... me. Or a blighted version of me, anyway. She was friendly to start with, but now the armour seems to be controlling her somehow. My current task in these catacombs is destroying the armour and freeing her."

All four team members stared at me in disbelief.

"Oh, *please* don't tell me you're going to suggest we help her," complained So'ballash.

Even Do'lelenii shook her head at that. "No. No, I was not going to suggest that. If she wants to 'free' a blighted husk, she can do so on her own."

"I dunno..." said Mi'taan. "A soulless ally might be just the thing we need against a soul mage."

"No," said the commander with finality. "We leave here as soon as Do'lelenii has her mana back, then we gather our survivors and demand Mru'walyn explain himself. If he attacks, he attacks, and either we will deal with it, or we fail."

I had no idea what was going on. Apparently, Mru'walyn had been using forbidden magic? Well, the soul magic description did say soul mages were generally hunted. But he'd said he wanted me to save the fox-kin? As far as I could tell without novice empath, he had been serious. Big, evil necromancer-ish soul mage didn't match up with someone legitimately trying to save his people...

"Can you at least dig me a tunnel to the throne room?"

"No, you can dig your own damn tunnel. While I acknowledge that you were sent here by the Goddess, and that we wronged you badly, that doesn't change the fact that you killed so many of our people. Not just those who sought to capture you, but innocent families and children, and even those who tried to protect you. I'll respect the will of the Goddess, but that doesn't mean I have to like you."

Fair enough. I'd take that over him hunting me down again. I watched the group of fox-kin leave not too long later, the sounds of the commander's explosive digging receding into the distance. Meanwhile, I managed to drag myself into a sitting position, where I could indeed see three of my corpses, one of which was missing its lower legs. Not just my legs, either, but an inverted dome of the ground had vanished. It looked like the dagger had teleported a sphere around itself. I looked around a little more, and yup, there was my shield with a curved segment missing from the bottom. I was fortunate in the way the dagger had bounced.

Now I just needed to regain the ability to stand upright.

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 9

Chapter 8: Zombie Warfare

Soul magic tolerance advanced to level 10

Evolution conditions met: Soul magic tolerance ranks up to soul magic resistance

There are no classes of magic more insidious than soul magic, whose effects can extend even beyond death. While users are routinely hunted down and executed in almost all civilised lands, there are always the few evil beings who escape the net. You have fallen victim to such a being, experiencing the pain as he tried, and fortunately failed, to rip all memory, ego and autonomy from you, well earning this upgrade from tolerance to resistance. This skill offers some protection, should outside influences attempt to interfere with your soul.

...What the *fuck*? I stared at the message in utter horror. If that dagger had stabbed me, from the sound of that description, it would have turned me into a complete vegetable, with no amount of respawning being able to fix it. Would it have been recoverable at all? Even if my resistance skill levelled, I couldn't imagine it being able to return lost memories. I'd have completely forgotten my quest, my name, where I came from... Presumably by ego it meant personality, and I didn't see that as being any better than losing my memory. Autonomy was more or less what I'd lost right now. Thank goodness that was the only one of the three that had taken effect.

Right then... Upstairs was off-limits, but how would I prevent him reaching me down here? He didn't come in person this time, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't the next. He'd sent some sort of trusted subordinate, but with that having failed, I wouldn't put it past him to make a second attempt.

I guess the obvious solution would be to find my way to floor four and get the heck out of his range. He apparently couldn't just casually wander down here, or he would have already been down here looking for me instead of sending a team in his place. The next question would be whether to go after my zombie twin first, or to search for the way down.

Given that I didn't know where the exit was, and that the throne room seemed like an obvious place for it, going after my zombie twin needed to be my first move. I peered at my map for a bit, counting up the number of rooms I needed to pass through. This was going to take a *lot* of tunnelling.

With my resistance evolution, I could finally stand and use skills again, although doing so still twinged, even through pain immunity. It was enough to get started, so I pulled my pickaxe out of my item box, and focused my class-boosted physical abilities on tunnelling.

Unlike the commander, who managed to dig under a wall in under a minute, it took me hours. At least to start with.

New skill gained: Mining

Even the most talented of blacksmiths can't forge a sword from thin air. People may look down on manual labour, but that doesn't make it any less vital. This skill will aid you in identifying promising ore veins, and knowing where to strike to mine effectively.

The skill's description said nothing about directly boosting my mining speed, but my speed instantly doubled nonetheless. Given that I'd never touched a pickaxe before and had no real knowledge of how to use it, a little artificially injected information went a long way.

And speaking of a long way... I completed tunnelling under the second wall, and did a bit of maths to work out how long it was going to take me to get back to the throne room, even with my increased speed. It was going to take days. I was going to need sleep. That wasn't something I wanted to do right now, so I activated trigger respawn instead before starting on the next tunnel.

Mining advanced to level 2

Mining advanced to level 3

Mining advanced to level 4

Soul magic resistance advanced to level 11

Bah... Another soul magic resistance level. I still wasn't completely free of whatever I was hit with, then. At least it wasn't slowing me down anymore, but I didn't like the idea of lingering effects from the universe's most insidious class of magic.

A loud groan from behind distracted me from my mining, and I spun around to find a zombie crawling into my tunnel. I quickly dispatched it with a pickaxe strike to the head, failing to unlock any new skills for my effort, then quickly jumped back out of the tunnel. When I'd entered the room, there had been no exits, just like every other room I'd tunnelled into so far, but the presence of a blighted husk implied that the walls had been opened. Sure enough, I made it out of the tunnel to find all four walls open, with dozens of zombies pouring through each one.

So, having failed to contain me with the floor's structure, whatever intelligence was controlling this place had decided to send in a zombie army. I would just have to hope the zombies were a limited resource; they had never seemed to return to the areas where me or my evil twin had cleared them out.

The hoard was too dense to flee, so I backed away into a corner as I armed myself. No way would I be able to fight all these off, but as long as I took out a decent number with each respawn, I'd get there in the end. Hopefully. I still needed to assume I was under an arch-mage enforced time limit. How much longer did I have left on trigger respawn? It was actually rather close. Could I survive until then? Preferably without getting too badly blighted?

Acknowledging the inevitability of everything, I fought the zombie hoard, managing to dispatch dozens of the things before they managed to dig their way between my chitin plates and through my silk armour to start doing real damage. A bite to the ankle failed to penetrate far, thanks to my toughened skin, but it still disabled my foot and flooded my leg with blight. While trigger respawn was close, I wasn't going to survive the five more minutes it needed. What a waste of an hour... I stashed all of my equipment, and let the zombies do their worst, hoping they'd cause enough damage for my corpse to not reanimate.

Thanks to pain immunity, being eaten alive by zombies wasn't too traumatic. Certainly not the worst experience I'd had since I arrived here. I had a rating system for that, too, and my current top three were the first time I'd been eaten by the tree, the more recent soul shredding, and that time I was eaten by the first spider. The commonality wasn't pain, but rather the helplessness. I could face any bad situation as long as I knew I could escape it.

One thing being eaten alive by zombies did supply was an abundance of blight.

Disease nullification advanced to level 29

Which did nothing but help me level my resistance. By the point I'd died, there was no way my corpse was in good enough condition to form another sapient zombie.

On the bright side, I didn't wake up to Mru'walyn standing over me. On the downside, I woke up to the walls of brick having been replaced by walls of zombies. They weren't doing anything other than standing completely still and silent, just far enough away from the barrier that I couldn't spear them from inside its protection.

I decided to try hit-and-run tactics, stepping out, swinging my sword and jumping back in. I drew my blighted sword, jumped out, decapitated two zombies with a single swing, then jumped backwards. Straight into a wall.

Cunning... Being too far outside of the barrier for me to attack from within also meant that I had to cross past where the wall would have been if there was still a wall. They'd used that to trap me. I hadn't heard the wall appearing at all, and sense mana or sense presence had picked up nothing. One second there was nothing, and the next a wall had decided to exist.

Alas, the mystery of how the maze worked needed to take a back seat to the hundreds of zombies that were once again trying to eat me. I held out as long as I could, but I stupidly hadn't repaired my armour since the last fight, and only managed to take out a dozen before they started inflicting wounds. At that rate, I'd have to die tens of times to clean them all out, assuming there wasn't anything producing more. Not as bad as the centipedes would have been, but still a pain in the arse.

Sword proficiency advanced to level 18

Proficient blocker advanced to level 19

Another death, and another awakening. Another pair of skill levels would hopefully help, and this time I repaired the damage to my armour, too.

Improvisational artisan advanced to level 14

These zombies were good for improving my skill levels...

Once again, I made my way out, this time edging my way towards them sideways to keep the room exit in sight. It stayed exactly where it was, and no wall sprung into existence. I killed zombies, jumping back towards shelter whenever they got too close, until the moment I was forced to spin to dodge a blow. The opening between the two rooms had left my field of vision for less than a second, but in that time, the wall had reappeared. So the walls could only be messed with while I wasn't looking? The zombies were certainly looking. Why didn't *they* count?

That time I managed to kill a few dozen of them before they pinned me down and started breaking through my armour. I wanted to work to *increase* my average lifespan, dammit, so why does it seem like it's getting shorter? The last few had been on par with a mayfly. A *female* mayfly.

A particularly industrious zombie got a bite in to my throat, and my life was over once more.

Proficient dodger advanced to level 17

I opened my eyes to a fox-kin. I didn't think he was anyone I'd seen before, but I couldn't devote much of my brain power to facial recognition on account of the amount that was focused on the dagger that was already plunging towards my heart. I'd item boxed my armour to save it some damage once I was pinned down, but it was but a moment's effort to restore it, lifting myself slightly off the ground as a nice, thick plate of the giant centipede's chitin appeared between me and the dagger.

Not that it helped much last time...

What else could I do? I wasn't in contact with the statue so I couldn't use fast travel. No time to move my arms. I could at least pull a couple more things out of my item box, layering my shield over my torso, and bringing out my blighted sword point first, right into the path of his arm. I activated trigger respawn, this time changing my respawn point to upstairs. There didn't seem any point sticking here now that it was compromised.

How were these bastards bypassing the barrier? And I guess this meant that the warrior commander hadn't prevailed against the arch-mage. At least this new intruder seemed to have killed all the zombies for me.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as I watched the wrist plunge into my sword. A dull clang suggested there was metal beneath his robe, but it wasn't enough to turn the blade, which pierced right through. He lost his grip on the dagger, which continued to fall point first into my shield. I saw a searing flash as it hit, but the expected pain didn't come. Instead, my limbs fell limp, and my vision, still spotty from the light, twisted. The brickwork of the catacombs was replaced by natural grey stone, and the face of the unknown fox-kin replaced by that of the very well known Mru'walyn.

Chapter 9: Motivation

Light tolerance advanced to level 2

Curse resistance advanced to level 15

New skill gained: Spatial magic tolerance

Anyone who claims that spatial magic is not a class suited to attacking lacks imagination. Teleporting individuals and goods is amazing for logistics. Teleporting those same individuals or goods over a glowing pit of lava? Not so amazing. At least for the victim. This skill will offer a small amount of aid in resisting unfriendly spatial manipulations.

Some sort of paralysis curse? It felt like the effect of being cut by my sword, but this was far stronger. It would, however, be cleared by a respawn. What were the chances of him leaving me alone for an hour?

"Now then, I believe I have an hour before you die on me again, assuming I have a good handle on your abilities. That will be plenty. I realise the chances of you cooperating are negligible, but my conscience compels me to say it anyway. If you relax and don't resist, this won't hurt you at all."

That would be a big fat zero, then. I pulled my blighted sword, which had been teleported with me, back into my item box before it fell off my torso. There was a bit of a squelch as the portion of the arm of the fox-kin that had been in range hit the floor too. It was quite a lot of arm, with some shoulder still attached, and I imagined that the rest of him wouldn't be doing too well. Good, but not exactly a great comfort given my position.

"Don't resist? You tried to turn me into a fucking *vegetable!*"

"That's unfair. Newborn would be a better description, since nothing would prevent you from forming new memories. With your unlimited lifespan, you would have plenty of time to redevelop," he said, before frowning as he realised the implications of my accusation. "You are versed in soul magic too? You continue to invent new ways to terrify me."

"No, it's just that when I grow resistant to things, I get told why. Unlike you, I'm not an evil soul mage."

"Ah yes, your mystery resistance ability. I would be fascinated to know how that works. That was why I was forced to use a paralysis curse this time; I wouldn't want you growing immune to my soul magic until I've erased every last memory of your quest, the holy sword, the surface and even the Goddess from your head."

I struggled to move, but despite my well functioning face and voice, my limbs were completely dead. There was no way I could let him do this... I needed to do *something*. If not for my toughened skin,

maybe I could summon my sword point downwards.

"Why?! Is that your idea of punishment? Future-me wouldn't even know you'd done it!"

"Punishment? No, not at all. This is to save my entire race. I *know*."

"Know? Know what?"

"What do you think?" he snapped. "Little miss hero, favoured of the Goddess. Oh so important you are. Not like the rest of us."

Okay... This was starting to get strange. What the heck was he even on about? "I legitimately have no idea what you're babbling about... I have no intention of wiping out your race!"

"And yet we all die anyway," he said with a shrug, before peering at me intently. "You really don't know, do you? Just where do you think you are right now?"

"Umm... Trapped in the evil lair of a mad soul mage? Who has presumably just killed the warrior commander, given that you're still here and talking about soul magic?"

Despite the continued block on novice empath, I could tell that answer made him angry. "You think I would kill one of my own?" he hissed. "Every remaining life here is precious. Even for the death of Mo'teckit, I sought no restitution. The commander and I, and the others from that group, simply had a discussion. Something which you seem to have a pathological phobia of. They were... sympathetic to my actions, once I openly explained myself, as were the others here. Everything I do is for the sake of my people."

Yup, this guy is crazy. Fortunately, our little talk and the success of my item box fuelled stab attack had given me time and inspiration for a new suicide attempt. I summoned a bag of the centipede's hardening fluid upside-down over the top of my head, breathing in deeply and flooding my lungs.

The arch-mage gasped and leapt forward, but I summoned a beetle horn using my foot as the base, point aimed right at him. It wasn't a great hit, but it pierced his thigh, and it was enough of a distraction that whatever magic he was trying to use fizzled out. The horn fell to the ground before I could retrieve it, but I considered it a horn well spent.

The result was unpleasant, but without limbs my options had been limited. I treated Mru'walyn to a smile as I suffocated, my lungs and throat clogged up with the amber-like substance, his reactions not being fast enough to get it out before it hardened.

He screeched in anger, waving his hands in a complex pattern. Sense mana showed a build-up of something, and suffocating takes many minutes, but whatever he was trying to do seemed long and complex, and despite his rush, he didn't finish in time. I died once more, this time with my respawn location set upstairs.

I opened my eyes to a fox-kin. This one I vaguely recognised, but once again, I couldn't devote much of my brain power to facial recognition on account of the amount that was focused on the dagger that was already plunging towards my heart.

Wow. Deja vu. At least this time I already had my armour on, saving me a few milliseconds. Not that I could do much with them. This time, I summoned my blighted shield; if I was going to go down, hopefully I could at least take my murderers with me.

Light tolerance advanced to level 3

Curse resistance advanced to level 16

Spatial magic tolerance advanced to level 2

The paralysis was the same as last time, but there was a major difference; I had spatial magic tolerance

now. It did nothing to stop the spell, but once space had finished twisting around me, I found myself not in the clutches of Mru'walyn, but on the rocky ground of their cavern, with not a single fox-kin in sight.

From my map, I could tell I'd almost made it to my intended destination, yet the small amount it had fallen short was, for now, my salvation. Could I shake off the paralysis before anyone found me? I still had my blighted shield resting on me, and hopefully the darkness from that would cloak me from any unfriendly eyes.

Where had I seen the fox-kin before that had just daggered me? Wasn't he one of the ones from the temple, that time they'd built the barrier around the statue? I was fairly sure he was the one that threw the green vial just before I fast travelled out of there. That meant he'd seen me respawn, too. What was it they were seeing that caused such odd reactions? I much preferred Do'lelenii's peaceful smile to the ones who proceeded to try to kill me, but everyone who had seen it acted strangely afterward.

I hadn't activated trigger respawn this time. With my respawn points guarded, there seemed to be no point, even if a respawn would have immediately cleared the paralysis. I was better off here. Frozen, hoping that no-one would find me. Mru'walyn would have timed the hour. What would he do when it expired and I didn't turn up? Assume that I'd respawned somewhere he didn't know about? Go to check on his underlings personally?

After half an hour of waiting, I still saw or sensed no-one, and the paralysis began to deteriorate. The moment I had enough movement back to crawl, I made my way slowly towards the previous location of the temple, to take the stairs down.

Another ten minutes of crawling, and I'd recovered enough to stand and walk. I soon made it back to the ruins of the town, if there was enough of it left to be called ruins, still without meeting a single fox-kin. Alas, my luck couldn't last forever.

The staircase down was very obvious, on account of the small fortification that had been built around it. It wasn't exactly heavily manned, but sense presence picked up two signatures from it. Fortunately, everyone was looking inwards, not outwards. Maybe I could perform a sneak attack? I continued to creep forward, storing my blighted shield because from this close up, the unnatural darkness would be more noticeable than I was.

New side quest: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine

You have entered a sacred place, but the shrine that should be present here has been utterly annihilated by those who would contend the will of the Goddess. Make an offering to recreate the shrine and restore her blessing to this land.

Clear conditions: Sacrifice mana crystals worth a minimum of 200 mana to the destroyed shrine.

Reward: Gain one class level

That caught me by surprise. Despite the temple being gone, I still picked up a side quest to repair the shrine. Well, I had a box of mana crystals. Let's hope they add up to enough.

Summoning the box, I took them out and offered them one by one. Where did these even come from? Presumably the smaller ones weren't as precious as the big ones, but there were a lot of them in here, and the way they were carefully arranged suggested that they hadn't just been tossed in there for storage. It was a rather nice box, too.

Oh... Were these crystals from Ja'yakril's pets? All the ones that had died, either to me or in the fighting that followed? Was I robbing his memorial here? That... made me feel kinda bad, actually. But I kept offering them up, anyway. I'd got through more than two-thirds of the box before the quest finally pinged.

Side quest complete: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine

A beam of light pierced through the floor, fairly close to the defensive installation, then widened until it

encompassed a circle tens of metres across. The scorched, black rock peeled away, leaving clean, grey stone beneath. The fortification disintegrated, the walls turning to dust from the top down and blowing away outside of the glowing circle, a fact which greatly surprised the fox-kin that had been standing on top of them.

A cloud of dust gathered in the centre, rotating and shrinking, collapsing into the shape of the Goddess' statue.

The group of fox-kin turned and stared at me, and sense mana picked up one building up some sort of spell. This time, I didn't hesitate. I knew what I wanted to do with my quest reward.

Skill enhanced: Resistance focus

Gain resistance skills much more easily, and level them significantly faster. Counts as an achievement for the purpose of evolving all resistance skills. Removes racial restrictions on resistance skills.

Pain immunity advanced to level 31

Pain immunity advanced to level 32

Evolution conditions met: Poison nullification ranks up to poison immunity

Poison is everywhere. It may be in the darts of an assassin looking to score a silent kill. In the traps of a hunter. In the fangs or claws of a predator. Even in the flesh of would-be prey. Any adventurer needs to be prepared for it if they wish to survive. After consuming powerful drugs, bathing in pools of poison, and surviving the kisses of death, paralysis and pain from an aranea regina, its ubiquitousness is something of which you are well aware, allowing this upgrade from nullification to immunity. This skill provides outright immunity to almost all toxins, with only the most potent of magical poisons able to penetrate your defences. You also know when your body takes in poison, along with details of the strength and intended effects.

Poison immunity advanced to level 31

Poison immunity advanced to level 32

Corrosion nullification advanced to level 26

Corrosion nullification advanced to level 27

Corrosion nullification advanced to level 28

Corrosion nullification advanced to level 29

Disease nullification advanced to level 30

Evolution conditions met: Mind magic resistance ranks up to mind magic nullification

There are few classes of magic more insidious than mind magic, and it is feared for good reason. How do you deal with someone who can make you see allies as enemies or a cliff edge as a paved road? Someone who can rip secrets straight from your head or even completely overwrite your personality? You have successfully endured the mental attack of a chilopoda sagacitas and fought off the influence of a vulpes sagax pet collar, earning the right to upgrade your resistance to nullification. This skill will strongly aid in efforts to shield your mind, and will alert you when your mental defences are under attack.

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 21

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 22

Heat tolerance advanced to level 5

Light tolerance advanced to level 4

Curse resistance advanced to level 17

Curse resistance advanced to level 18

Curse resistance advanced to level 19

Soul magic resistance advanced to level 12

Soul magic resistance advanced to level 13

Argg, wall of text. All I'd really wanted was the boost to my soul magic and curse resistances in the hopes of protecting myself from whatever Mru'walyn was trying to do, but it had also triggered skill evolutions. Also removed racial restrictions, whatever that meant. It didn't seem to have immediately given me anything new, but maybe it meant there were new skills I could get now that I couldn't before?

From the levels, it seemed that my levelling bonus had jumped from fifty to a hundred percent. It was also enough to clue me in to how achievements worked; I needed one to get from rank one to two, then three, then six. Or now zero, two and five, thanks to the skill upgrade.

Despite the quest description saying that I'd gain one level, it had actually given me one for each class, but my second class could wait until I'd dealt with the attacking fox-kin. The spell-casting one had finished producing a fireball.

Not that he had a chance to use it, thanks to a second fox-kin slicing his arm off.

"Unlike these cowardly mages, I'm not afraid to do my duty," he shouted at me. "Go!"

Chapter 10: Assassination

He didn't need to tell me twice, so I fled, running down the stairs, which were now easily visible with the defensive wall gone. The de-limbed fox-kin was swearing his head off, but didn't seem to have any way of stopping me. The other couple of guards looked conflicted, and novice empath was picking up pure existential terror, but it wasn't entirely directed at me. A small amount of it was, though, or I'd have thought they were worried about what Mru'walyn would do to them for letting me go. Frankly, I had no fricking clue what was up with the fox-kin, and I really wanted to go back to pretending they didn't exist. Every time they tried to catch me, things went horribly wrong for them. Why couldn't they just learn to leave me alone?

Once I was a good distance down the stairs, I slowed back down, not wanting to fall as the air turned stale and rotten. It was a shame I hadn't had a disease nullification evolution as part of that batch, but repeated blight infections presumably didn't count as repeated achievements. I'd need to find some other nasty diseases to die of.

Back when I'd first been sent here, my status was only two words long, but now it was getting rather silly.

Name: Katie

Primary class: Princess of undying laughter (level 7)

- Class skills -

Trigger respawn

Item box {Enhanced}

Mapping

Appraisal

Resistance focus {Enhanced}

Fast travel

Secondary class: Aberrant monster tamer (Level 2)

Improved silk

{Empty} [+]

{locked}

{locked}

{locked}

- Combat skills -

Unarmed dabbler: Level 5

Proficient dodger: Level 17

Spear proficiency: Level 16

Proficient blocker: Level 19
Dagger proficiency: Level 15
Sword proficiency: Level 18
Proficient parrier: Level 11
- Resistance skills -
Friend of fear
Pain immunity: Level 32
Poison immunity: Level 32
Corrosion nullification: Level 29
Disease nullification: Level 30
Mind magic nullification: Level 22
Heat tolerance: Level 5
Light tolerance: Level 4
Cold resistance: Level 20
Curse resistance: Level 19
Soul magic resistance: Level 13
Spatial magic tolerance: Level 2
- Crafting skills -
Improvisational artisan: Level 14
Artistry: Level 4
Mining: Level 4
- Scouting skills -
Novice stealth: Level 10
Sense presence: Level 9
Novice empath: Level 7
- Magic skills -
Sense mana: Level 7
Bend mana: Level 5

Another class and a few more resistance skills, and it wasn't even going to fit into my vision. Free of the fox-kin, what class skill should I pick next?

Stronger poison: Increase the potency of your body's poisons.

Hypnotic aroma: Your bodily fluids gain a mild version of the hypnotic abilities of the angelica vorax.

Exoskeleton: Develop a chitin exoskeleton to provide additional protection.

Luminance: Your body glows with a toggleable soft white light.

Festering wounds: Wounds you inflict with your own nails, claws and teeth become diseased with blight-like symptoms.

Extra limbs: Grow an additional pair of clawed limbs.

Mana metabolism: You can metabolise ambient mana, slightly reducing the need for physical food and water.

As with my first class, a pair of new skills and upgrades for the old ones. But no. None of the above. Most of the things there had negative effects; I didn't want to be accidentally poisoning friendlies, or turning into any more of a monster than I already was. Those that didn't, like mana metabolism, just weren't particularly powerful. Extra limbs sounded nice, but I'd prefer fingers to claws, and trying to explain extra arms away if I kept them when I got back to Earth sounded all the wrong sorts of fun.

It was time for an experiment. What happened if I didn't pick a skill until my next level-up? Could I pick both new skills? Would both skills be at the upgraded power level? The upgrades mattered less now that I knew I'd eventually be able to enhance them, but that was still a long time away. More interesting were

the new skills; not only the two new ones I'd get at my next level, but also any extras I happened to pick up from befriending new monsters. All the skills I'd been offered were obviously influenced by one of the four monster relationships that had been listed when I picked the class.

At the bottom of the staircase, I crept towards the shrine, and sense presence showed there was still someone there. At the moment, I *really* didn't want to die, because the respawn was too much of a risk. Facing my zombie twin again was likely to result in death. *Reaching* my zombie twin was likely to result in death. If I killed the one guarding this shrine, how long until Mru'walyn noticed, and sent a replacement? *Could* he send a replacement? Given how badly their population had been decimated, he couldn't have an unlimited supply of underlings.

I continued on until I reached the adjacent room. Sense presence told me that the mage was on the other side of the wall, right up against it. That was irritating... How was I supposed to sneak up behind him?

Someone had cleared all the zombies out of the area, but all four walls were still open. It was a pity I couldn't make invisible threads like the spider queen, or I'd web up an entrance and goad him. What else could I do? I could see light crystals of theirs set into every alcove, so I couldn't blind him by targeting the light. I could maybe toss a spider claw or something to make a noise, and hope he went to investigate, but that would put him on guard and reduce my chance of sneaking up on him.

Did the fox-kin need to pee ever? Could I wait for him to answer a call of nature, or drop his guard for some food or drink? Did they even sleep? I didn't want to sit around waiting for ages. I also couldn't discount the possibility of there being more than one guard, but the other being too weak for sense presence to register.

I looped around the room and looked through each entrance, hidden by the dark torches, while I could see in perfectly well. There was indeed only one of them. Sense mana told me he was carrying a number of magical items, but not what they were. It was a pity I *couldn't* control the shrine barrier, like everyone seemed to think I could. It was also a pity I had no ranged weapons. Without the aid of skills, I couldn't just throw something sharp at him and expect it to harm him.

...Wait. It had been a while since I got my spear skill, but didn't it say that they 'at a pinch can even be thrown'? I'd even done so once before, in the heat of the moment when fighting the flying eldritch starfish. I retrieved the spear I'd stolen from Si'janrii and gave it a few hefts, and found that I did intuitively know how to grip and throw it, and that he was within my range. So, my plan would be to throw the spear, then run for it. If it hit him, great. If it didn't, I'd return to the room behind him and hope he walked far enough from the wall for me to backstab him.

I tossed the spear and ran, my silk foot-wraps doing a great job of keeping my steps silent. I saw the reflections of a flash from behind me, but no squelchy noises or screams. Drat, he must have shielded himself somehow.

Another burst of light came from behind, this time red, and accompanied by a dry heat. I was lucky I'd run as soon as I'd thrown it.

"A guard's spear? Seriously? You're *still* trying to stop us, knowing full well it will lead to your end?"

Oh, that was interesting. He thought it was a guard that threw it, rather than me? And they were still convinced that not newborn-ifying me would lead to all of their deaths? Or 'end', as he slightly oddly put it.

Throwing the spear, despite being an obvious attack, had turned out far better than a suspicious noise. He apparently didn't think much of the guards, because he confidently strode forward towards the area he'd blasted with his flame attack, giving me the opportunity to sneak behind him. I retrieved my blighted sword and thrust it through his heart. Or at least, where *my* heart was. It wasn't as if I was an expert on fox

monster anatomy. As long as I hit something important, all was well.

I'd apparently hit something important, because he gurgled for a few seconds, then flopped forward, dead.

Evolution conditions met: Novice stealth ranks up to proficient stealth

Why let your enemies know you're coming? Honour is a pointless weight worn only by soon-to-be-dead fools, or the precious few strong enough to bear it. Many a mighty warrior has been brought down by an unseen dagger from behind. In your case, it was a mighty mage and an unseen sword, but the principle is the same, earning you this rank up from novice to proficient. This skill will aid you in remaining unseen, unheard and undetected, whether that's for the purposes of wielding the dagger or hiding from one.

That was kinda cool. A proper, skilfully conducted assassination. Maybe I should have taken that assassin class after all?

The skill upgrade added 'undetected' to the list of effects. Did that mean it would help me hide from esoteric senses, like my sense presence skill? That would be a handy addition, but I wouldn't want to rely on it without knowing the size of the effect.

Now, how long until anyone notices he's gone missing and sends a replacement? Could I just camp out around here and assassinate the mages one by one until they run out? Probably not; if I failed to catch one by surprise, or Mru'walyn came in person, I'd be screwed. Best to launch a raid on the throne room now, respawn if I have to, hopefully before any replacements arrive, and then get the heck off this floor.

Given the multiple mana signatures on the corpse, I first stripped it of everything I could detect, before shoving the whole thing into my item box. No point leaving evidence behind. My spear was thankfully still intact, laying safely in a corner of the shrine room, presumably deflected by whatever released the first flash of light, so I boxed up that too, before hitting my looted goods with appraisal.

Necklace of shielding

This item will automatically deploy a shield to protect from any surprise attack. Can only activate once every 24 hours.

Oh, so he hadn't blocked my spear at all. Thank goodness, or my backstab would have been deflected instead... I dodged a bullet there. It had a sky blue gem in a golden setting, held on a thin golden chain. The necklace went around my neck, under my armour. Shame the results didn't tell me how long was left on the recharge, or even that it was recharging. Presumably, I'd need to enhance my appraisal skill to get the full details.

Ring of attention

This item aids in focus and concentration, as well as tripling the amount of time that the wearer can operate without suffering sleep deprivation.

So that was how he was stood staring at the statue for ages? It was just a plain, unadorned silver band. I wouldn't have much use for it, but it went on my finger regardless.

Mana tracker

Locates any traces of the registered mana signature within a medium radius.

So that's what they were using to track me the first time. Why hadn't they used it since? How large was a medium radius? How did I change the registered signature? It went into my item box, since I had no immediate use for it.

Warping steel dagger of paralysis

This plain steel dagger has been enchanted by a master, inflicting a powerful paralysis curse on its target even when blocked. It will also warp itself and a small surrounding region of space to a preset destination on strike.

Attack rating: 20

A better dagger than my spider claws, but given the warp enchantment, not one I could actually use. That went into my item box too.

Bracer of spatial fixation

This item has been enchanted to prevent any form of teleportation.

Now *that* was an interesting one. I couldn't even put it into my item box. It simply wouldn't vanish. I put it around my own wrist for now, because it would defend against one half of the daggers they kept trying to stick me with, but from the description, it couldn't be disabled. Would it block fast travel too? Any spatial magic I *wanted* to work on me?

Presumably, the first mage to dagger me on respawn had been wearing one of these too, and my improvised sword stab had broken it. Hah. That would have been pure luck, if so. A necklace of shielding, too? I suppose that wouldn't have activated because I hadn't surprise attacked him. He was the one who rammed his wrist down onto a sword. Nothing to do with me at all. I wasn't even holding it.

With the loot sorted, I made my way towards the throne room while pondering my strategy. Perhaps I'd dismissed that dagger too quickly. If the teleportation wouldn't affect me, and it didn't actually need to pierce the armour to take effect, all I needed to do was tap the animated armour with it, and Mru'walyn would get an instant, heavily blighted surprise package. Would the paralysis work on it when it had no muscles to paralyse? I *really* hoped not.

Chapter 11: Queen of the Damned

Every exit was open, but there wasn't a single zombie in sight. Perfect for me, but it made me suspicious. What was the intelligence controlling the place planning this time? How intelligent was that intelligence? Was it operating on instinct, or was it sapient? Maybe it had run out of zombies, and didn't know how to react to that? Maybe my upgraded stealth skill was hiding me from it?

With the throne directly facing the entrance, I couldn't sneak into the room, so I openly marched in. All I needed to do was evade dupliKatie, charge the throne and tap the armour with my stolen dagger. How hard could that be?

My zombie twin was standing behind the throne, as before, wearing a face of immense boredom.

"Finally," she exclaimed upon seeing me. "What took you so long?"

"Your friend sitting there blocked off all the exits and sent hoards of zombies after me."

She tilted her head, apparently not understanding.

"Besides, didn't you say you were going to come to the shrine room?"

"I just didn't feel like it, okay?!" she shouted. I really hoped whatever mind control she'd been inflicted with wasn't permanent, because I wanted my friend back. Even if she was me.

My now rather air-headed zombie twin edged towards me, then stopped, glancing at her shield. Guess she didn't want to lose that too. She turned around, tossed it behind her, and picked up the giant two-hander that had been laying across the armour's legs instead. She lifted it effortlessly, despite the size, then started charging me in earnest.

That was annoying; if I teleported the animated armour to Mru'walyn, now it wouldn't be armed.

Despite how easily she'd picked up the sword, it was still obviously weighing her down. Her charge was slower than the last time, giving me the opportunity to dodge around her and approach the throne. I stashed my shield and sword for some extra speed, then retrieved the dagger.

"Wait up," she yelled, as the animated armour started to stand. It reached out a giant hand towards me, with far more agility than it had any right to have. What was the range on the teleportation of these daggers? A couple of metres at most? I aimed at its belly and scored a direct hit, which completely failed to even scratch whatever tough material it was made from.

The armour vanished with a pop, as did a chunk of the throne. "Whu?" exclaimed dupliKatie groggily, as she collapsed mid-sprint, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Vestige of the King, Cursed armour

This armour was once worn by a legendary vulpes sagax king, who during his life brought great peace and prosperity to his people. As he aged, he became fixated on his own mortality, not believing any of his children to be capable of living up to his own achievements, and being unwilling to hand over power. Fixation became obsession and obsession became madness as he finally turned to the undead blight to extend his life. In the chaos that followed, his former armies were able to slay the mad, undead king, albeit at great loss to themselves. The king was burnt in holy fire and his equipment laid to rest in the catacombs. Alas, the equipment was not fully purified beforehand, and the shadow of the king rose once more, consuming the catacombs and raising all who had died fighting against him.

I'd fired off an appraisal during my assassination attempt, but didn't have a chance to read it until everything was over. I was pretty sure the fox-kin of today didn't have a king. Surely someone would have mentioned it by now? It wasn't a bad backstory, though. Far better than the story of the dragon making the fox-kin because he was bored.

It was taking her a while, but dupliKatie seemed to be recovering, and by the end of five minutes she was slowly pulling herself up off the floor while groaning. It was time to find out if whatever had been done to her was permanent, but the way she'd collapsed as soon as the armour was disposed of was promising.

Sense mana reacted, not to her, but behind me, and I turned to see the air rippling and distorting. I dived out of the way on general principles, having no idea what was happening, but not wanting to stand next to it, whatever it was.

Mru'walyn stepped into existence and immediately focused on dupliKatie.

"There you are," he muttered, gesturing. Sense mana was screaming at me, and I recognised it as whatever he was casting at me the last time I saw him, except that this time he must have finished preparing it before teleporting himself. Bypassing casting times was cheating, dammit!

He hadn't noticed me at all, so I leaned heavily on proficient stealth and made my way behind him. I wasn't fast enough though, and had to watch helplessly as he launched a pure white beam at my zombie twin.

Soul magic resistance advanced to level 14

Even though it wasn't directed at me, just *looking* at it hurt, and I had to slam my eyes shut, pausing in my attempt to backstab him.

"You fool," he continued, apparently to himself. "Did you not think I could follow the path of a transfer spell to locate the source? At last, I've succeeded in saving this fake world. Now, let's get you to safety."

"Was that supposed to do something?" asked my zombie twin. "I didn't feel anything?"

He froze. "How..." he started, before he was interrupted by a white flash and a crack, as a shield blasted away the blighted sword I'd just tried to stab him with from behind. Crap. Was it too much to hope that his shield was single use, like that other mage? I pulled my regular sword of paralysis out of my item box and made a second attempt, swinging at his neck as he turned around to see what had just attacked him.

He caught my sword in one hand, then his eyes opened wide as he saw my face.

"You're supposed to be a mage, dammit!" I yelled in frustration. "Since when do mages *catch* swords?!"

"Since..." he started, before he was interrupted by a massive two-hander cleanly bisecting him above the waist.

"Not a bad sword this," said my twin, "but I'd prefer my old one back, please."

Mru'walyn's torso fell to the floor, and he lost his grip on my weapon, so I stabbed him a few more times in the face to be safe.

"Seriously, what was that supposed to do?" asked my zombie twin. "Do I need to be worried?"

"Soul magic. He wanted to take my memories. Something about saving the world."

"Ah, and I have no soul, so it did nothing. Cool. Nothing to be worried about then, as long as the world isn't going to end imminently. It needs to at least hold on till you find the sword. And I'm back again, by the way. Sorry about that. Damn thing got into my head, and I don't have mind magic resistance anymore. At least it confirms I have a mind, which is nice, I guess."

"You're awfully nonchalant, given what just happened."

"Would you prefer me to panic, flail around and not get anything useful done?"

"No, nonchalant is fine. Welcome back."

"So, with the flippancy over, who the hell was he, and what the heck just happened?"

"That was the arch-mage, Mru'walyn, and for some reason, he was convinced that wiping my memory and personality was vital for saving the fox-kin. He's had his minions camping my spawn points for my last few respawns. Hopefully, that's the end of our troubles with the fox-kin."

"Oh? What happened to the warrior commander?"

"He turned all friendly after seeing me respawn. Well, friendly-ish, anyway. He stopped trying to viciously murder me, which I consider a win. Actually, that's a good point. So far, everyone who has seen me respawn has acted weirdly, other than you. What happens?"

"Nothing interesting. The statue glows a bit, like it did the first time you got a side quest. A big glowing ball shoots out of it, expands, and when the glow dies down, it leaves your new body behind."

"Maybe the statue glowing has some significance to them? Anyway, time to see what loot we got this time."

He did indeed have a necklace of shielding. Could I wear two at once? If I put it in my item box, it wouldn't recharge, now that it had a time stop effect. No, taking it would be rather greedy of me; my zombie twin had acted as a decoy there, as well as scoring the killing blow. She'd well earned her share.

"Necklace of shielding. It'll protect you from one attack per day. It was that white shield thing that sprung up when I tried to backstab him. Want it?"

"No downsides? Then sure, why not?"

My zombie twin put it around her neck, where the golden lustre quickly faded and the gem darkened, leaving behind a blood-red stone in a tarnished setting. Hopefully, it would still work. Now, what else did he have?

Ring of physicality

This silver ring contains a simple but high-quality enchantment that boosts physical abilities.

Another plain, unadorned band of silver, but this one I wanted.

"Boosts physical abilities. Can I keep this one?"

"Sure. I'll trade it for a brain."

I looked up from the bisected corpse and resulting pile of guts in deep suspicion.

"What?" asked my zombie twin. "I remember everything from while that armour was ordering me around, and while the vast majority of it was standing around being bored, your brain was delicious. It's not my fault that the stereotypes had it spot on."

"I thought I swore off eating myself?"

"Only because you thought it would make things awkward when you got back to Earth. I don't have that problem."

"Fine, next time I die, you can have my brain."

The ring went on another of my fingers, slightly too big for me, but my silk glove would hold it in place. Next up were a couple of mana crystals, which went into my item box.

"Hmm? Isn't that the crown that the armour was wearing?" asked my zombie twin. It was hanging off his belt. Why had he brought it back?

Cursed Crown of the Damned

This ancient artefact was once worn by a former king of the vulpes sagax. It was buried with the rest of his belongings after he died in madness, but was heavily tainted with the undead blight, twisting and raising the spirit of the king and his men. The one who wears this gains control of the surrounding blight, in exchange for being blighted in turn. This item is cursed and is irremovable once worn.

"Mine," said my zombie twin, snatching it off me. "I'm already blighted, and no way am I letting anyone else wear it, given that it can control me."

"You heard the bit about it being cursed, right?"

"Sure did," she answered, plonking it on her head. Nothing much seemed to happen. Perhaps her tattoos got a tad more ominous, or her yellow eyes a bit brighter. She looked a little more imposing, her integrated armour shifting slightly, giving her a slightly curvier look. "Anything else?"

Since I was looking at the crown, might as well check out the sword too.

Sword of the Damned

This great two hander, forged of pure demonite, is far too heavy for a normal mortal to wield effectively. Blights both the wielder and target.

I could lift it easily enough, despite the protests of disease nullification. I could even swing it. Once it had started swinging, though, stopping it again without falling over proved impossible.

"Perhaps we should leave this one here?"

"If you don't want it, then sure."

What about the armour itself? Could someone wear that? Preferably purifying it first. It wasn't here though, so I couldn't appraise it. What had Mru'walyn done to it? Had he destroyed it? Trapped or contained it somehow? Ignored it while he came down here as quickly as possible, and it was now slaughtering the rest of the fox-kin?

Mru'walyn didn't have anything else on him. Given that he was the arch-mage and a powerful enchanter, I couldn't believe that was all he had. He must have come down here without gearing up properly first, which again, was very lucky for me.

"So, now what?" I asked myself. Both of myself.

"Well, the holy sword isn't on this floor, so I suppose you want to move on to the next," answered the other me.

"Hmm? You sound like you know that for certain."

"I do," she answered, smugly. "I can see the whole floor. Except for the shrine room. This crown is cool."

"Then can you tell me where the way down is?"

She pointed at a wall. No, at where a wall had been the last time I looked. Wow, she can control the maze now? I'd never have found that on my own.

"Then shall we go?"

"Only you, I'm afraid," she said with a sigh, poking at the damaged throne but then sitting in it anyway. "I'm blighted, remember? If I move around the dungeon, I'll bring the blight with me. Everything we meet will have to fight us for their lives, intelligent, friendly or otherwise. The dungeon will be twisted around us. You'll never have peace, and you'll never be able to talk to anyone but me. It's not safe for me to leave this floor."

"You're more important than the other occupants of this dungeon, though!"

"To you, I'm sure I am. Likewise, you're important to me, and you'll have a better journey if I'm not travelling with you. Of course, you're welcome to come and visit, if you want to spar, or train some skills, or make out. I'll be here. The queen of blight and her zombie army. Once it finishes regrowing; it's kinda depleted at the moment. Anyway, unless the first thing you find down there is a shrine, I'll be seeing you soon enough."

Make out? I had to admire the way she managed to say that in such a sombre conversation while keeping a perfectly straight face.

"Fine. Maybe I can find some sort of communication magic item so we can at least talk. They have to be something that exists, right? Take care of yourself."

Giving my zombie twin one last wave, I turned and walked down the steps, making my way to the fourth floor.

Side quest failed: Clear the blight

Penalty applied: Class skills locked for twenty-four hours

Oh, right. That was a thing, wasn't it? I'd been expecting it at some point, given that I'd made the decision to ignore the quest the moment I'd got it, and apparently trying to leave for the next floor was the trigger. No way was I going to venture into new, unexplored territory without my class skills.

"Forgot something?" asked my zombie twin, as I reversed direction.

"Something I neglected to mention, but when I repaired the shrine on this floor, I may have slightly got a quest to kill you. I just failed it."

"Oh. And now you have some nasty penalty?"

"Yup. Twenty-four hours thereof."

"Looks like I get the pleasure of your company for a while longer then, and it would be remiss of me to not offer up my thanks for not re-killing me. Speaking of magic items, don't you have a couple of cursed rings in your item box? I know how much you were tempted to experiment with them when you found them, and I'm sure you could fix the effect by lopping your finger off and respawning. Also, you owe me a brain."

I stared with raised eyebrows into my own grinning, tattooed face. "Twenty-four hours without my class skills," I clarified. "That which is within my item box shall *remain* within my item box."

"Oh well," she said disappointedly. "I'm sure you can think of something inventive with your webs instead."

I could, indeed, be inventive with my webs. By the time the penalty had worn off, and I was making my way down the next staircase for the second time, I'd resolved that should I ever earn a third class slot, I would skip through the rare classes with my eyes closed.

Chapter 12: Slimed

The staircase down started off neat, with sharp, square edges, even steps and flat surfaces. There were even a few more torches burning black. That soon ended, though, and surfaces changed from stone slabs to natural rock, the steps uneven, damp, slippery and treacherous, and the light faded to nothing. Well, 'light' was the wrong word, but 'dark' was ambiguous and confusing. The inverted light cast by the black torches and blighted moss had run out, leaving me in the more regular sort of darkness, and even my new yellow eyes were blind. I pulled out my fox-kin torch and continued down with care.

The air was stale and humid, but it lacked the stench of rot of the catacombs, and the blight dwindled to nothing along with the unphysical darkness, leaving my maxed out disease nullification to swiftly dispose of my lingering infection. What was keeping it out of here? Was it because the plain stone passage had nothing for it to feed off? Or was it simply because whoever had built this place had decreed that floor three was the undead floor, and floor four had a different theme?

One of the last things Mru'walyn said had stuck with me. He called this world *fake*. He didn't want to kill me; he wanted me not to complete my quest. I'd commented on how stupid and unphysical this place was back on the first floor, and had even contemplated that it may have been built specifically for me. I'd not read too much into it, because I'd been applying Earth logic, and with this place being obviously magical, I had no guarantee how much that made sense. But what if I was right? And what if Mru'walyn had worked it out too?

If this world was created just for me, what would happen when I left? Would it cease to exist? Would completing my quest and saving the world I was summoned to doom this one? How messed up would that be...

I'd like to claim that I had a job to do and ignore it, but wasn't I supposed to be a hero? Accidentally blighting the fox-kin settlement after they put so much effort into hunting me wasn't something I felt guilty about. Perhaps I should, but it really hadn't been on purpose, and I'd only done what I'd deemed necessary to protect myself. It helped that with the benefit of hindsight, my decision had proven correct; given Mru'walyn's ulterior motives for getting me down there, it was obvious that if I'd cooperated with them, I'd have ended up memory-wiped.

But that didn't mean I didn't care about the few left behind. There were fox-kin I liked, although Mru'walyn had implied they'd all given tacit approval for his crusade, so perhaps I might have to reconsider. But even putting them aside, there was the spider queen and dupliKatie. Heck, there was even the gluttonous tree.

All that brooding had taken enough time for me to reach the bottom of the staircase, coming out in a natural-looking passage much like the first floor. There was no moss here, but there were occasional glowing crystals jutting out of the walls. They were too sparse for navigation, so I kept my torch out as I moved cautiously through the empty passage towards whatever lay ahead.

Something impacted my head, causing me to jerk backward, but whatever it was moved with me. I felt it descend down my face, coating my skin and covering my eyes, nose and mouth in under a second. My

vision briefly distorted, as if I was looking out through a pool of water, before my eyes started to sting and my vision blurred. I slammed them shut, and tore at whatever the thing on my head was, but my hands went straight through it, as if I was trying to grasp a handful of liquid.

Was this... a slime? From the brief look I'd had, it had been completely transparent. How was I supposed to get it off? I scraped my face along a wall, but it just flowed out of the way. Bashing my head against the same wall resulted in an equally lacklustre effect. I desperately tried to scoop bits of it off, but it just flowed around my hands, leaving my efforts completely ineffectual. Seriously, was I going to be suffocated by a *slime*? Slimes were supposed to be beginner enemies!

And then things got worse as it invaded my nose, irritating and burning the flesh inside. It made its way down my throat and then forced my mouth open from within. More poured in, burning my mouth and oesophagus. My body reacted by trying to sneeze, cough and gag all at the same time, which achieved little but to empty my lungs of air and blow a stream of bubbles through the slime, some of which took the opportunity to invade my trachea, causing a nasty choking sensation as it poured into my lungs.

Corrosion nullification advanced to level 30

New skill gained: Suffocation tolerance

Most living things need air, and where there's a need, you can be sure something will be there to take advantage. Whether by smothering, crushing, drowning, or indirect routes like air-born poisons, predators will never skimp on innovation when hunting their prey. This skill will permit you to hold your breath a little longer.

I opened my eyes back in the catacombs' shrine room, which was blissfully fox-kin free. That had been embarrassing. I'd just died to a *slime*. What was the correct thing to do in that situation? Other than the obvious of not letting it land on my head in the first place. My experiences with the spiders had taught me to keep an eye above me, but I hadn't expected a transparent enemy, and it hadn't made any noise or responded to sense presence either. It had been a legitimately impressive ambush.

I'd got suffocation tolerance from it. That was interesting, because I'd been drowned by my pet murder tree on many occasions without gaining it. Did that come under the heading of something that would normally be racially restricted?

The slime had been corrosive too. My corrosion nullification had done a good job of protecting me, with even my eyesight not being immediately destroyed, but once the slime invaded my lungs, even my high levelled skill hadn't been able to stop it. Pain immunity meant that it didn't hurt, but that didn't mean the experience of having my lungs dissolved was pleasant. That had been overkill; I'd been suffocating anyway. What sort of prey did it normally catch, that needed *that* combination?

My equipment was in good condition, at least. I was worried about the state of my helmet, but both the spider silk and centipede chitin had resisted the slime's corrosion well. Even though I hadn't stashed it before my death, it hadn't been damaged significantly during the time it took me to respawn. I'd dropped my torch, though. I still had one moss covered shield that hadn't been blighted. I'd have to use that until I could recover it.

Still, that wasn't my main problem. Even thinking up ways to deal with the slime wasn't my main problem.

"Wow? Back already?" the newly crowned zombie queen mocked as I passed back through her throne room. "It can't be much more than an hour since you left. Did you trip and fall down the stairs or something?"

Yup, there was my main problem, still sitting on the throne where I'd left her. Oh well, might as well get the pain over and done with.

"A slime fell on my head."

Yup, there it is. I ignored her as she burst into riotous laughter and made my way back to the stairs.

"Hey, wait up!" she called. "You've *got* to give me more detail than that."

"There's not much more to say. Transparent slime sitting on the ceiling. Couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, couldn't sense it. It dropped on me as I walked past, swam up my nose and dissolved my lungs."

"Ow, nasty. You should befriend it. Could be a good replacement for our pet tree."

"Actually, I have a mining skill now. I should see if I can dig the tree out at some point."

I returned down the stairs, wondering how to deal with the slimes. Attacking the liquid part of the slime had achieved nothing. I hadn't seen a core, but I didn't exactly get a chance to examine it closely. It might have some sort of solid weak spot for me to attack. If not... It had been a while since I'd wanted fireballs, but this situation would qualify.

In the absence of any good ideas, I'd need to find one before it dropped on me, get a good look at it and hit it with appraisal, and hope that I could pick up a clue from that. Or walk around with a shield held permanently above my head.

I crept along the passage, this time being far more cautious. Now I knew that just because I couldn't see or sense an enemy, it didn't mean it wasn't there. I made it as far as my previous corpse, now naked and mostly dissolved. My resistance skills presumably stopped functioning when I died, or I couldn't imagine it having made that much progress in the time I'd been gone. Still, it hadn't completely finished consuming me, which meant it was still there, wrapped around my old legs, which were visibly melting as I watched.

Limus acidus

Despite sharing the slow movement of all limus species, this particular subtype is an efficient ambush predator, utilising its transparent appearance to drop on prey unawares. It uses its corrosive body to smother and digest its targets.

Nothing there that I didn't already know.

The slime completely ignored me as I got closer to inspect it. I still couldn't see a core, or any point of weakness. Or any inhomogeneity at all, for that matter. My previous instance's legs were encased in what looked like nothing more than a smooth bubble of water, and it was only the way it completely defied gravity that indicated it was something else.

Despite the transparency, it was strongly refracting light, but while that was obvious with it wrapped around my legs, it wasn't enough to make it stand out while attached to the ceiling, where the rock behind it didn't have any features that were noticeable when distorted.

What other information could I glean? There wasn't enough of it; despite having eaten a significant portion of my body, it barely seemed larger now than when it was wrapped around my head. Interesting, but I didn't see how it would help. Unless it implied that it had divided? I was already on guard against more of them, so it wouldn't matter if it had.

Maybe I should just ignore them? As long as they didn't drop on me, it didn't seem like they were much of a threat. And even if I did miss one, they didn't have anything that threatened me through my respawn cheat. But ignoring them meant admitting defeat, and I really didn't want to admit defeat to a slime. There had to be *some* way to kill the things.

My previous body was pale, and there was no blood around despite the damage, so it must have eaten it all. Given how vigorously it was still going, I could deduce that it was immune to my poisonous bodily fluids. Or perhaps they lost their effect after death? I could experiment by letting it eat off an arm, but it

may well just move up to my head or otherwise be uncooperative, so best to shelve that plan.

Could I catch it in a web? It was fluid enough to flow up my nose, so a coarse net wouldn't work, but something more like my water bags might. I hadn't tested my own silk for corrosion resistance, but I already had bags made from the queen's webs. They should hold it. But what then? That didn't exactly help me kill it.

What would happen if I dumped one of these into the murder tree's pool? That would be an interesting fight, as they tried to dissolve each other, but probably a boring one to watch.

Bereft of any ideas, it was time to try some weapons, starting with ones I didn't mind losing. I pulled out a beetle horn and stabbed at the slime. It completely ignored me, the horn doing no noticeable harm and passing through the slime's body without resistance. I tried again with a spider claw, and then my sword of paralysis, hoping that the slime wouldn't corrode it, but again, nothing happened.

One last thing to try, then. I stood back and held out my arm at as great a distance as possible and pulled a large, heavy chunk of centipede shell out of my item box, jumping backwards as gravity dropped it right on top of the slime, in case it splattered. It didn't splatter. There was a wet slapping noise, the shield bounced a little, then tilted over and slid off, while the slime continued its meal undisturbed.

Not that I had a clear view of the situation, because I had apparently jumped backward directly under another waiting slime. With a metaphorical sigh, on account of the way I couldn't do a real one through my blocked airways, I stored all my equipment and made a few half-hearted efforts to get the bloody thing off while I waited for yet another death.

Suffocation tolerance advanced to level 2

...I hate slimes.

Chapter 13: Hunted

Making my way back to my pair of corpses, ignoring my zombie twin's hysterics on the way, I carefully avoided the slimes and picked up my dropped chunk of shell and torch. They may have won this round, but as soon as I found a way of actually hurting the things, I was coming back for my revenge!

My first corpse had been completely picked clean, and only bones remained. The slime had gone, presumably returned to the ceiling, so its corrosion had limits. Either it couldn't dissolve them, or it would take too long for it to be worthwhile.

To keep both hands free, I stuck the torch to my helmet with my silk. Maybe it wouldn't help much, but having two empty hands I could summon a shield to wasn't going to hurt.

Proceeding carefully, keeping an eye on the ceiling at all times, I managed to avoid a dozen more of the things and made it past them into a large cavern. Or at least, I assumed it was a cavern; the passage opened up on both sides, but the entire space was pitch black with no light sources whatsoever beyond the single torch I was holding, so I couldn't see how far it went on for.

The fox-kin torch revealed some of the surrounding area, and I could see orange, pulsating vines snaking around the floor. They didn't respond to appraisal, despite obviously being alive. I could see them with sense mana, though, flows of mana within them moving in time with the pulses.

I gave one a prod with my spear, but it didn't seem to react. A harder thrust severed it, causing a viscous green liquid to spill out for twenty seconds before it dried up and hardened, sealing the exposed ends. Again, there was no response to my attack, so hopefully these vines wouldn't jump up and throttle me the moment I stepped inside.

I took a few paces in, feeling a touch of relief when nothing jumped out and murdered me, before beginning to explore in earnest. Once again, I was glad of my mapping skill. Just like the centipede

cavern above, there would be no way to orientate myself in this place without it. At best, I could have mounted my glowing shield at the passage entrance and tried to keep it in view.

I spotted a denser cluster of vines and followed them to a... flower? Fruit? Lump of pulsating, exposed flesh? Whatever it was, it was the source of the mana that was being pumped through the vines. It was a bowl shaped, brown structure, coming up as far as my waist. The vines spread out from the bottom, like roots, while from the top sprouted an array of crystalline structures that looked very much like smaller versions of the crystal trees above. Mana was being drawn in from the air into those crystal trees, then pulled down into the vines.

It still didn't respond to appraisal. Come to think of it, I'd never tried to appraise the trees up above, but I'd appraised all the plant life in the jungle, when I was trying to find resources to build a method of descent, so it wasn't as if appraisal didn't work on plants. Why had I never appraised the murder tree? That was one hell of an oversight... I suppose it was so long after meeting it I got the appraisal skill that I'd never considered it.

I continued walking, passing several more of the strange mana collectors, before spotting something new. A tall stalagmite thrust from the ground, the vines wrapping around and climbing it, then ending at the top in a bulbous protrusion. As I approached, disease nullification kicked in and informed me of some sort of pathogen in the air. It wasn't struggling to neutralise it, though, so I continued forward.

Still nothing from appraisal, but sense mana showed the mana being pumped into the bulbous section, where it was building up. It couldn't keep building up indefinitely, so where did it go from there? Was it the source of the disease in the air? With disease nullification fighting it off with ease, I approached for a closer look, only for the tip of the swollen vine to split open and squirt out a large aerosol cloud.

Disease nullification helpfully informed me that the pathogen concentration had leapt by multiple orders of magnitude. Stupid curiosity. It wasn't as if it was important how the plant worked. I fled the area, but it was too late, and my skill informed me it could no longer fight off the infection. Oh well, hopefully it would count towards the next skill evolution.

I didn't seem to be feeling any ill effects for now, so I continued my exploration of the cavern. I found more of the mana collectors and pathogen-spitting fruits, but it wasn't until I'd travelled a fair distance from the entrance that I spotted something new. Or rather, a lack of something old. There was another of the bowl-shaped mana collectors, but the pieces of crystal were missing, along with sections of the bowl. The wounds to the plant were sharp and straight, and despite having long since sealed over with the green fluid, it was obvious they were deliberate. Something had cut away parts of the flesh.

It was a shame I had no tracking skills. Was this done with teeth, claws or tools? Did something eat part of the plant, or collect materials? I saw no other signs of disturbance in the vicinity, but it was a sign that somewhere in the cavern was something other than the vines. I just had no idea as to *what*.

Sense presence hadn't reacted to a single thing on this floor, so there was nothing strong nearby. Alas, as the slimes had proven, power wasn't everything; things could hard counter all of my abilities despite being physically slow and weak. Thankfully, despite my lack of tracking skills, I could be fairly sure the wounds to this plant had not been inflicted by slimes.

I continued my search, and the next point of interest I came across was a damaged patch of vines. Unlike the damaged mana collector, this didn't look deliberate. Nothing had been cut away, but they had simply been damaged, as if by being bashed or stepped on. There were also shards of crystal around, as well as brown, crusty patches. Blood? Again, appraisal showed a weakness by not working on random substances I found on the floor. My best guess was that there had been a fight here, so a sign that whatever else shared the cavern with these vines consisted of more than one group.

The next point of interest wasn't something I discovered, but rather *it* discovered *me*. I was examining

another harvested bowl when I heard a quiet twang. Still being on edge from the slimes, and ready to dive out of the way of falling objects at the slightest provocation, I dived to the side, only to see a shard of crystal embed itself into the bowl a moment later.

New skill gained: Sense danger

Few beings would pass up the opportunity for a surprise attack, and any adventurer must keep a constant watch for traps and ambushes. This skill provides a low level awareness of when something is targeting you with malicious intent.

Oh, nice! I bet that would have warned me about the slimes. Maybe not in enough time to do anything about them, given how little effect level one skills had, but at least I'd have been able to start uselessly panicking a fraction of a second earlier.

I found it hard to imagine that twang as anything other than a bowstring, which meant intelligent enemies. I hadn't seen the exact direction the crystal arrow had been fired from, but I had a rough idea, and stared out into the darkness. I could see or hear nothing, and sense presence drew a blank. Should I hang around here and hope that they ran out of arrows before I missed a dodge, or run forward and hope I met them?

Remaining still, not wanting to mask the sound of another fired arrow with the rustling of my armour, I waited. Soon enough, another twang came. No, not one. There had been *three*. I now had a better idea of direction, though, so I crouched down and summoned my shield. Moments later, I heard the clangs as three crystal arrows impacted it but failed to penetrate.

Deciding I would rather see my enemy, I ran in the direction of the shots, with the combined output of my shield and torch lighting my way. I saw nothing. What sort of range would they have had? They couldn't have been far away, or I wouldn't have heard them. Did they flee once their first sneak attacks failed? Had they just moved to the side, and were still watching me from the darkness? Should I stash my torch and shield in the hopes they wouldn't be able to see me either? No, they lived here, so I should assume that whatever method of perception they were using didn't require light.

Given the crystal arrows, presumably they were the things that were harvesting the crystals. Continuing my exploration in the knowledge that there were things in the darkness with enough intelligence to use tools was not exactly ideal. Doubly so, given that they'd taken pot-shots at me without warning or provocation. At least, deliberate provocation. Perhaps I'd wandered into their territory, which they'd marked in some way I couldn't perceive. Alas, I had little choice. I couldn't just leave.

Despite my fears, I wasn't bothered again as I found more harvested bowls. Should I move towards or away from the signs of activity? Less chance of attack, but also less chance of finding anything interesting. If the mystery creatures had a communal settlement somewhere, there was a good chance that it also contained the way down to the next floor.

What was the worst that could happen? No, silly question. Their leader could turn out to be a powerful soul mage again, or heck, their whole species might subsist by devouring souls. Better question; what was the worst that was *likely* to happen? Going from previous patterns, they'd stab me a bit, engage in a spot of heavy bondage, then eat me. I could cope.

Noting the position of the harvested bowls on my map, I walked in the direction where they were densest.

Sense danger advanced to level 2

I ducked as another crystal arrow went flying over my head. Wow, apparently my pessimism about that skill was unwarranted. I hadn't heard the twang that time, but still had enough warning to dodge.

The skill fired another warning, but this time, rather than a feeling of danger approach my top half, it was more of a full body experience, leaving me none the wiser about how I was supposed to dodge. Moments later, at least half a dozen arrows hammered into me from all sides. Nothing penetrated my armour, and

the silk and my own chitinous skin beneath absorbed the impact.

I ran forward, with no idea what I was running towards, but simply not wanting to be surrounded by things I couldn't see, only to come up against a wall of stone. It wasn't built, but looked almost natural, the ground sloping upwards until it hit ninety degrees, then jutting up for a few metres. Almost as if something had told the rock to reshape itself.

Sense danger advanced to level 3

This time, the warning from sense danger was larger, but again, it offered no clue as to what I was supposed to do about it. Maybe my pessimism about the skill was warranted after all. Or alternatively, I thought as I spotted the giant boulder, far larger than I was, flying towards me in complete defiance of gravity, maybe it was just that there was nothing I *could* do about it. Given the flying lump of rock and the wall, they must have an earth mage of some kind. Shame I was stuck in between the two.

Not wanting my equipment to get crushed, I stored it and waited to get flattened between a rock and a hard place.

Chapter 14: Village

New skill gained: Earth magic tolerance

While the earthen class of magic is better suited for defence than attack, no-one would deny that a giant rock to the face is going to hurt. This skill will offer a small amount of protection from earth-magic powered assaults.

New skill gained: Blunt damage tolerance

Clubs, war-hammers, staves or even a fist, plenty of weapons work by subjecting their target to sudden, overwhelming momentum. This skill will allow you to absorb a small portion of the impact.

I opened my eyes, but it made no difference. Weren't the catacombs supposed to be lit? Don't tell me the fox-kin trapped it again? I made an attempt to stand up, and couldn't. My limbs wouldn't respond. Great, captured again. I activated trigger respawn on general principles, not that it would do much good if I'd already been caught once without even noticing. I shifted my respawn location to the top floor, just in case that was better. At least my memories hadn't been wiped yet. Hopefully, Mru'walyn had been their only soul mage.

Then, as I returned to full awareness, I remembered the last moments before I lost consciousness; the boulder had drastically slowed just before it hit me. I had still been crushed between the wall and boulder, but it was possible it hadn't killed me. The feedback from pain immunity was telling me that I wasn't paralysed, but that my limbs had been removed. From the amount of pain I should be feeling, the removal hadn't exactly been surgical.

Okay, new theory; I hadn't been captured at a shrine without even waking up first, but had been taken prisoner by the mystery creatures instead. And they'd left me alive with my limbs removed. So, this would be the heavy bondage phase I'd predicted then. What had I guessed would be next? Getting eaten, wasn't it?

As further confirmation, I was still diseased. It still didn't seem to have any negative effect on me, but my body was fighting a losing battle against it, and it had spread somewhat since I'd been knocked out. And as final confirmation, I had my map, which showed me only a few tens of metres away from where I'd been knocked out.

Drat... My anti-teleportation bracelet! I couldn't item box it, so it had still been around my wrist. With my arms chopped off, it wasn't on me anymore. I reached out with sense mana, and picked up a few signatures nearby, but nothing I could identify.

...Was it wrong that I was more concerned about losing a magical item than I was about losing my limbs? Yes, that's probably bad. My limbs were admittedly easy to get back, but it still wasn't a healthy state of mind.

"Grrxxkzkwtwxxxlz," said something right in front of my face, making me flinch in surprise. I'd had no idea whatsoever it was there. At least, I assumed 'said' was the correct term. There were inflections and pacing in there that suggested some sort of language, but nothing that I could understand. Or even pronounce. For all I knew, it was gargling gravel.

"Grrxxkzkwtwxxxlz," it repeated, louder.

"Have you never heard of vowels?!" I shouted back.

I was lying on my back, so even without limbs, I had options. I summoned my torch onto my stomach and at long last beheld my attackers.

I kinda wish I hadn't...

There was one right in front of me, presumably the one speaking. Two more stood behind it, if standing was the correct term. They were another species that didn't use something from Earth as a template, vaguely icosahedron in shape, with a limb at each vertex for a total of twelve. Three were in contact with the ground. Each limb was identical, with two joints dividing it into three equal length sections, and ending in three symmetrically arranged fingers. For the limbs in contact with the ground, the fingers were splayed open, increasing the size of the effective foot. On the other limbs, I could see that all three fingers were opposable, and could be used to grip. It was the crystal spears pointed at my face, each held in three limbs, that gave that away.

There were no sharp edges to the monsters, and if it wasn't for the regular placement of the limbs, I wouldn't have been able to recognise the shape. The skin was grey and translucent, and I could see through it to pulsating tubes and brown slabs of flesh beneath. I saw nothing that I could identify as the usual facial features; eyes, nose, ears or mouth, yet it had been speaking from somewhere.

The closest one pointed one of its limbs at me, opened the fingers wide, and in the middle, flaps opened up to reveal a triangular maw.

'Krxlktvvlzz,' came out of it. So that's where its mouth was. Did it have one at the end of *every* limb? And where were the ears?

"Yeah, I *really* don't speak your language," I replied.

It didn't seem to like that answer, judging from the noises and threatening motions it was making with its spear.

[Untranslatable], carnes multiformis

This intelligent race of monsters are capable hunters, skilled with spears, bows and earth magic. Their structure leaves them less capable of using short, bladed weapons, nor are there many capable of using magic of other elements. With four distinct genders, their reproductive process is more involved than with most species, leading to them typically gathering in large communities. This particular specimen has average physical abilities and advanced magical abilities, specialising in the element of earth.

So, it had a name, but whatever was creating these displays had no clue how to render it into English. Given their language, I doubted I'd be capable of pronouncing it even if it could.

'Krxlktvvlzz!' it repeated, this time in a scream that sounded like someone tipping a bag of jagged rocks down a steep hill, the spear aimed directly at my neck.

"You might as well just kill me," I said, storing the torch again before I lost it. "There's no way we're going to understand each other, and thanks to you lopping my arms off, I can't even draw you any

diagrams."

Moments later, I felt the spear pierce my throat, and my last thought as I bled out and drowned in my own blood was to wonder how it knew my throat was a good target when its anatomy was so different to mine. I couldn't imagine them coming into conflict with the fox-kin, given the catacombs between them. What else was down in that cavern that I hadn't encountered yet?

I awoke for the second time outside of the expected catacombs, and it took me a moment to remember I'd changed my spawn point when the weird many-limbed blobs had knocked me out. What the heck was I supposed to call them? I suppose I could just use their real name, *carnes multiformis*. I wasn't sure what to make of the things. They'd made an attempt at communication, but only *after* shooting me repeatedly and hacking my arms and legs off. That seemed the wrong way around to me, if they expected any sort of sensible discourse. Heck, if I'd been one of them, with my mouth at the end of an arm, I wouldn't have been able to talk back at all.

The wall I'd come across, and the appraisal comment about large communities, suggested that I'd bumped into some sort of town. When I'd woken up after my capture, I'd certainly been indoors, or at least in a much smaller cave than the cavern I'd been knocked out in.

Again, I was glad of waking up with no fox-kin interference. Even better, the new plaque hanging up on one wall, which certainly hadn't been here the last time I visited, suggested that the fox-kin weren't something I'd have to worry about ever again. It contained a message thanking me for resealing the catacombs, congratulating me on my victory over Mru'walyn and promising never to attack me again as long as I stayed away from the mine that housed the surviving refugees, and didn't drop any further blighted monsters into the middle of it.

I was happy to abide by those conditions; I couldn't blame them for not liking me, and I wasn't a fan of them either, so staying out of each other's way seemed the best solution.

So, what next? Did I really want to take the time to dig out my pet murder tree? I didn't need any of the stuff I'd left in there, I didn't need the aid of the tree to respawn in a painless manner, and as for my 'art', the longer that stayed buried the better. Maybe the mushrooms would make a good poison source? The nectar, too, now that my item box stopped time.

No, maybe some other time if I had a definite use for the poison. For now, I'd continue my explorations of the dark cavern. I'd avoid the settlement I'd run across this time, and map out the rest of it. Hopefully, I'd find some other points of interest, preferably of the sort that didn't immediately try to kill me.

I placed my hand against the statue, started to invoke fast travel, and discovered, much to my surprise, that I had a new destination available. I hadn't unlocked any new respawn points that I'd noticed. How did that happen? Out of an abundance of caution, I invoked trigger respawn, armoured up, then jumped to the new location.

I came out in pitch darkness, and checking my map, I was right in the middle of the town I'd just decided to avoid. Probably the record for my swiftest broken promise ever. Maybe they'd carried me past a statue while I was unconscious, and it had unlocked without telling me? Or at least, without me being in a fit state of mind to pay attention to my messages.

I heard strange noises all around me, which novice empath translated as expressions of surprise. Oops; guess this was somewhere public. I pulled out my torch, and found myself in the centre of a triangular courtyard, with buildings along the three sides, all fashioned from unadorned, plain grey stone. These monsters really like things to come in threes. With the exception of their genders, apparently, although they all looked the same to me, despite the lack of clothes to hide anything.

Novice empath advanced to level 8

The level up was nice, but with creatures so alien, I was surprised it worked at all.

While the creatures nearby were rapidly retreating, I saw a nine bulkier individuals, armed with spears again, moving swiftly towards me. I hadn't seen one of them move before, and they did so by rolling, swapping over the limbs that were in contact with the ground. And that answered the nickname question; they were blatantly d20s. But as interesting as it was to watch, it was time for me to leave.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," I called out, reaching back to the statue.

An earthen wall shot up between me and it.

"Seriously?!" I yelled.

I shouldn't have let go of it in the first place, even though I'd only done so to pull out my torch and have a look around. Now what? If they were going to be aggressive to me, I had no qualms about fighting back, but I didn't really have the means. Now that I knew how virulently it spread, I didn't want to resort to weaponising the undead blight again, and I was far too outnumbered to fight conventionally, even without their earth mage support.

None of them actually attacked, but took up guard positions, spears aimed at me. After that, nothing happened.

"So... Now what?" I asked, not expecting a response and indeed not getting one.

Appraisal couldn't tell me the names of any of them, but did identify one of them as an earth mage. Probably the one that blocked me off from the statue.

The stand-off continued for a few more minutes, and the only assumption I could make was that they were waiting for someone else to arrive. Either someone who spoke my language, or someone with the authority to decide what to do with a random human teleporting into the middle of their settlement. I hoped for the first option; I was legitimately interested in having a conversation. Given previous experiences, the second option would likely result in more delimiting.

Another group arrived. Four of them, this time. Three were armed, and the last was not. He moved awkwardly, shifting from side to side in an apparent effort to avoid putting weight on a couple of his limbs. His central body had strange growths, too. Was he sick? He certainly smelt like it, a strong earthy scent coming from him that I hadn't smelt from the others. Or, from his appraisal results, which called him ancient, maybe it was just old age?

"A flllattt oneee," he droned at a glacial pace. "Llllong hasss it beeeen."

Yay, English! Ish, anyway. His pronunciation could use some work, but given his lack of a human mouth or throat, I could forgive it. And 'flat one'? That's... okay, I could sort of see it. It's a description I'd reserve for something close to the ground, but only because I use myself as a baseline. Compared to them, I guess I am rather flat. The other half of his greeting was definitely inaccurate, though.

"An hour isn't long," I pointed out. "That's when the last one was here. You cut her arms and legs off and stabbed her in the throat."

The elderly blob wobbled a bit, then started rumbling in its own language. One of the spear wielders that had come with him rumbled back, at which the elderly one prodded the guard in the central blob, an action which novice empath informed me was equivalent to a human whapping someone over the head. Apparently, the elderly one hadn't liked the answer he'd just been given.

Nor did the other guards, and when sense danger informed me of another unavoidable incoming rock attack, I hurriedly stashed my equipment once more.

Something smashed into my head, hard, and as I lost consciousness, I pondered that maybe calling them

out on their lie may have been a mistake.

Chapter 15: Disease

Earth magic tolerance advanced to level 2

Blunt damage tolerance advanced to level 2

At least I was getting skill levels for being knocked out all the time. Where was I now? All my limbs were still attached, so I was being treated better than last time. Not that I could move them; they were firmly tied down to whatever I was lying on, by cold, rigid bonds. They had no give at all, and I was definitely going to need to subtract points from this bondage experience for the lack of comfort.

I summoned my torch out onto my tummy again. Since I'd never seen the monsters react to it, I was confident by now that they were completely blind. I was met with stone bars only centimetres away from my face. Looking around, I appeared to be in some sort of tiny, stone cage, in a large, featureless room, and wouldn't be able to move far even if I wasn't bound.

Even my bindings were stone, which seemed like an odd material choice, but given the lack of a door on the cage or locks on my bindings, I assumed an earth mage had created the setup on the fly. They probably didn't keep equipment around for restraining 'flat ones'.

Trigger respawn had used up slightly more than half of its countdown, so I still had some time to wait. There were three of the creatures standing guard, each armed with a crystal spear, but I saw no mages, nor the English-speaking elder.

"So, now what?" I asked, but there came no reply, not even in their own language. Well, this was boring. They'd gone to the trouble of finding someone who could speak my language, only for him to say nothing more than a glorified hello.

I was lying on hard stone, without a mat or pillow, making me glad of my pain immunity, but I found myself wishing I had a boredom immunity skill instead. Would that be something I could get now, with my resistance focus skill enhancement?

I spent another twenty minutes in idle thought until something finally happened, the triangular door opening and another three of the creatures entering. The newcomers weren't carrying weapons, but one was holding a thick, cylindrical stone, which it deposited alongside me. All six creatures backed away, before sense mana detected the three newcomers spell-casting. It also picked up something inside the stone cylinder.

Sense mana advanced to level 8

All three were stone mages, according to their appraisal results, and sure enough a stone dome rose over me and my cage, leaving me trapped with the featureless cylinder, with only a small opening in the dome connecting me to the outside. The stone of the cylinder melted away, leaving behind one of the bulbous pods that had sprayed me with some sort of pathogen on my last trip. The opening closed, leaving me alone in the sealed dome with the mystery pod.

The pod split and, thanks to the tightly enclosed space, filled the air with a concentration of pathogens even higher than the last time. Trapped as I was, I couldn't run away from it like before, either.

Why the heck did they want to infect me with a disease? Was it supposed to do something to me? Was this some sort of unethical medical experiment? Disease nullification informed me I was being completely overwhelmed, and would start suffering ill effects within minutes, but that hardly mattered; trigger respawn kicked in, sending me back to the catacombs.

With a sigh, I climbed back to my feet, re-equipped myself, and made my way back downstairs. This time, I really would stay well away from that village. They obviously had some sort of purpose there, but

what it was, I had no idea. If I met one of them again, I'd have to pretend I didn't know they kept murdering me, and see if I could get the English speaker talking for longer.

Sense danger advanced to level 4

The slimes were a tad easier to avoid this time thanks to my new skill, but I still had no way of killing them. Revenge would come one day. Maybe. Given the murder tree, I didn't have a great track record of following through on my revenge threats.

This time around, I started searching in the opposite direction of the village, filling in my map but finding nothing but the vines and their mana collectors and diseased pods. It was a couple of hours before I found anything out of place; another bowl that had been harvested. But this time I was far away from the village and its surrounding cluster of harvested plant life. Was there another village nearby?

I got my confirmation after finding a couple more harvested bowls, not in the form of the previous arrows, but when I heard the deep, grating speech of the *carnes multiformis* behind me. Turning to look, I saw a group of nine, spears held far from the ground and pointing upright. I was really glad of novice empath, because reading the things on my own was impossible. This time it was telling me that they were making a gesture of non-aggression.

Novice empath advanced to level 9

It was an improvement on the other village, but they'd been relatively peaceful the second time too, until I'd pointed out that I knew they'd murdered my previous instance. I decided to play along for now; they hadn't shown an ability to do anything that would interfere with my respawn, and if I was rendered unconscious with another rock to the face, sense danger would give me enough warning to store my equipment and activate trigger respawn.

The group of nine made motions which novice empath wasn't sure of, but which I interpreted as asking me to follow them, before they started rolling off. I followed behind, watching as they organised into a triangular formation with me at the centre. These things really did like their triangles.

There was indeed another village, and it was nearby. One of the groups of three entered the village, while the others motioned me to wait. Not too long later, a group of four appeared, with three armed and one unarmed and moving at a slower than usual pace. They were much like the group that the elder of the other village had appeared in, except that this elder wasn't quite as misshapen.

"I greet you, flat one," it said, in a far clearer voice than the other. "Might I ask what brings your kind to our cavern? You are not the first that has travelled here recently, and I regret that this area is... unsafe."

Well, yes, there's a reason for that. You! But this time, I kept my thoughts to myself and played along.

"I'm an explorer. I seek an artifact known as the holy sword, which is said to be at the very bottom of this cave system. But I wouldn't say no to meeting new people on the way."

The creature wobbled, which seemed to be their sign of uncertainty.

"I have never heard of the artifact you seek," it said eventually. "I do know of tales that speak of a path to the abyss, but that way is closed. Not with all the forces of our settlement could we hope to open it."

It wobbled again, before adding, "But perhaps you can provide a way."

Oh? Looked like playing along was working. I was getting useful information here!

"I mentioned that this area is unsafe," it continued. "There is... another settlement. Similar to us, yet different. We are at war. They kidnap our women to spawn their young, while they slaughter our males. They have... caught and killed two of your kind. And in doing so discovered that you are highly resistant to the guidance."

Why was it talking about males and females when appraisal said they had four genders? Translation issues? And the guidance? What the hell was that? The name for the pathogens emitted by the plant pods? He'd admitted the murder of my previous two instances, but tried to pin the blame on a separate village. That could be true, but if they were at war, how did he get the information so quickly? It had only been a few hours since my second instance died.

"I assume the guidance is the disease emitted by the pods at the end of these vines?" I asked, choosing to ignore the mention of the other village and my deaths for now.

"Hmm... Pods and vines... It has been long since I last used this speech, but yes, it is. A terrible affliction that twists the infected, pulling them from their own paths and turning them into cultivators of the great tree. Forced to tend to it for the rest of their lives, after which it consumes them for its own nourishment."

I spent a moment in mental acrobatics, trying to make sense of that. So things infected by that disease don't die, but get turned into some sort of drone that tends to the vines? No, the vines were hardly a tree. Did it have a main body somewhere that I hadn't yet discovered?

"Thank you for the information, but what is it that you want from me? If I have trespassed on your territory, I apologise, and will avoid it if you mark it."

It wobbled again before rocking backward. "Our territory is well marked, but I forget your senses are not the same as our own. It is likely that you cannot perceive it. But no matter; if you mean us no harm, you are welcome here. As for what we want... Is that not obvious? We seek the secret of your defences for ourselves. But while our enemy seeks to extract it by force, we would prefer to ask politely."

There was a twinge from novice empath. He wasn't lying, exactly, but there was a suggestion that if I declined, our relationship would deteriorate rapidly. Not that I had much choice; it wasn't as if I could share my skill.

"I'm afraid I'm just naturally resistant to diseases. It's not some secret or magical item that I can share."

The creature twitched from side to side. Disappointment? "I suspected as much," it said. "We would still appreciate if you would offer a blood sample, before and after an infection. Perhaps our healers can find some clue in the way your body fights back. In exchange, we have goods to trade, and should you wish to take revenge for your fallen comrades, and have sufficient forces to take their village, we would offer you our cooperation."

Now *that* was an offer that caught me by surprise. Trade I could understand, but they were offering their aid for an outright assault on another village? I suppose if they really were at war, then that's something they'd probably do anyway, so to them it's more of a way to get extra forces in a fight that was going to take place even without me.

"Sorry, but we don't have those sort of forces," I answered, eliciting another side-to-side twitch from it. "Do you have a statue in your village? Humanoid shaped, like me, but with wings?"

"The statue of the Goddess?" it answered. "Yes, of course we do. The Goddess' protection is the only reason the village is not lost to the guidance."

That was a good point. Why didn't everyone get flattened by the barrier in the other village when they attacked me? Those things were ridiculously inconsistent, and I was starting to suspect that the one in the fox-kin temple was the only one that actively protected me. I hadn't seen a similar effect from any other. Or was it only those that came at me with intent to kill, and not to capture, even if the purpose of the capture would result in my death regardless? "Then you're welcome to some blood in exchange for access to the statue. I can use them to travel quickly."

Letting them subject me to medical experiments in exchange for access to a new shrine didn't seem like a

great trade, but a respawn would deal with the disease, and hopefully I'd get a new class perk for making a deal.

This village really did seem to be far more friendly than the other one, and I was led inside while my guide helpfully pointed out stores that sold weapons and food, none of which I could use or eat on account of having less than twelve arms and being unable to digest magical crystal. We passed by the statue, which, like the previous village, was in the centre of a triangular plaza at the centre of the settlement.

New respawn point activated

Finally, I was led to another building, where another of the creatures collected a not insignificant amount of blood, and then followed us outside the settlement to one of the plant's pods, where they asked me to walk up to it and wait a few minutes before returning and taking another blood sample. Fortunately, the pod hadn't squirted out a fresh batch while I was there, and I hadn't been hit with anything I couldn't clear out, but nevertheless the team I was with hung *far* back, and novice empath told me they were all utterly terrified of the thing.

"Thank you for your help," said my guide. "With luck, this will help us produce a defence, or even a cure. We will look forward to the day we can use this plant as a weapon against our ancestral enemy."

I kinda wished it hadn't added the last bit on the end there, but at least the deal had gone well. There wasn't really anything forcing them to hold up their end of the bargain, but it wasn't as if it had cost me anything, and activating the shrine counted for something even if they didn't cooperate in the future.

I had no further business in their village, so after asking the location of the great tree, I decided to make my way there. I made it all of two steps before the cavern lit up in a million bright, overwhelming colours, and then one step further before I threw up.

For striking a bargain with the carnes multiformis, you gain olfactory perception.

Chapter 16: Guidance

"Are you... well?" asked my guide, with obvious concern. Or maybe fear? I think he was more worried that I was infectious than he was I was going to keel over and die.

Wait... I'd just used 'he' instead of 'it'. It was suddenly so obvious that he was male. And I could see two females and two males behind him. And all this time, I thought they were naked! They were wearing... So *bright*... I turned away again, feeling another bout of nausea.

"I'm okay. It's just a sensory overload," I answered, pinching my nose shut. It made no difference. I'd probably grown a whole host of olfactory sensors over my skin or something. Turning away had helped, but only a little; I could still 'see' behind me. It was blurry, as if out of the corner of my eyes, but it was there. Apparently, I had three-sixty degree directional scent detection. With *depth perception*, too, however the hell that worked. No wonder I was feeling sick. This was nothing like my eye upgrade, and it was going to take some getting use to.

"If you say so," he said, but novice empath told me he was unhappy. "I would ask that you don't enter our village while ill, please."

I nodded, and the carnes multiformis departed, hurrying back to their village. They'd been fearful and twitchy ever since stepping outside of their barrier. Given how terrified they were of this guidance, now that they'd deliberately infected me with it, I got the impression I would be rather less welcome than I had been. But I'd obtained some information, and a new class perk, so I wasn't unhappy.

Speaking of the perk, I was glad to see them leave; they were the stinkiest things in my vicinity by far. Or at least, two of the five were. While I'd thought them completely naked, with even their skin translucent,

the elder and researcher actually wore fragrances as clothing, tracing decorative patterns in different smells. The guards wore the scent of stone, blending into the rocky background. If their main enemy was the other village, that was unsurprising; they wouldn't want to advertise their position. They were effectively wearing camouflage.

I, on the other hand, now looked completely naked, given that my armour smelt mostly of me. How ironic...

I spent some time after they'd left getting to grips with my new smell-seeing ability, taking a full half hour before I felt it safe to start moving. Even half an hour was impressive, though. I didn't have the relevant bits of brain to process a new sense, so how did it even work? Yet another item to add to the list of things I'd need to keep secret on Earth if I wanted to avoid the rush of mad scientists trying to autopsy me.

Despite the initial overwhelmingness, being able to perceive my surroundings without light would be useful. And the additional perk wasn't the only benefit new monster relationships gave me. Did this one add new skills to my list of options?

Crystal metabolism: You can metabolise mana infused crystal in addition to your species' regular food.
Prehensile feet: You can grasp with your feet with low dexterity.

Yes, but still nothing I wanted. Although the combo of prehensile feet and an enhanced version of extra limbs could turn me almost into one of them, if I ever fancied being a dozen-limbed monstrosity.

My new olfactory sense wasn't unlimited in range, but did let me pick things up further away than I could see with my torch. Some things, anyway. I couldn't sniff out the vines at any further distance than I could see them, but the bowls were detectable from further away, and the pods further again. And even beyond that, I could tell I was in a wide open cavern, and sniff out what I could only assume was the tree. Much like the pods, but on a far greater scale. With the distraction of suddenly sprouting new sensory organs dealt with, I once again began my trek in that direction.

There were no harvested bowls anywhere in the tree's vicinity, the blobs apparently staying well away, and the density of both bowls and pods increased significantly. The background level of the guidance picked up to the point disease nullification was complaining about it even when I couldn't see any pods, and at the rate of increase, it was obvious that I wouldn't be able to safely approach the tree itself.

Making myself a silk mask didn't help, but that was no great surprise; if a simple mask worked to block it, the carnes multiformis wouldn't be so scared. If I wanted to approach the tree and see if it did indeed guard the way down, I would either need to evolve my skill, or come up with a better defence. For the defence route, helping the carnes multiformis more earnestly would probably be best; they had far more experience with the stuff than I did. For the skill evolution, how many achievements did I have now?

I had the three from when it evolved to nullification, and the one from resistance focus. I would need two more. What else had caused disease nullification to level? There was the guidance, and when the spider queen borrowed my kidney. Would the spider queen have counted as an achievement? The centipedes eating me from inside out did, but they were described generically as a 'massive parasite infestation'. That was a maybe. I hadn't died to the guidance yet, or allowed the disease to progress far, so that probably didn't count yet. In that case...

I activated trigger respawn and walked bravely towards the tree. What was the worst that could happen?

As I got closer, the bowls and pods died out completely, but the levels of pathogen in the air continued to rise. The vines were still present, but were linked together into thicker branches. Or roots, perhaps? With sense mana, I could see them pouring mana towards the tree.

Disease nullification had started to lose its battle, and even if I backtracked, I'd still eventually be overcome. Probably not before trigger respawn fired, but it would happen. The same was true of my first

dose too, though, so I kept walking forward, regardless.

"Come on!" I shouted into the darkness. "I've taken on the undead blight, so you're going to have to try harder than this to get me."

The darkness rustled back.

I paused. I was pretty sure something had just *responded* to my provocation. That wasn't expected. My new smell-sense couldn't see anything other than vines and the nebulous mass I was walking towards, so I pulled out my torch for a proper look.

I was surrounded. There were carnes multiformis all around me, forming a circle and moving in time with me, keeping me at the centre. That was strange enough already, but the monsters were all *wrong*. They blended in with the generic plant and disease smells so perfectly that I hadn't noticed them at all. Their skin was still translucent, but was tinted green, and their bodies were infested by vines. Some of them were *flowering*. These must be the drones my guide was talking about, but why were they just following me like this? If I tried to turn back, would they attack? Were they just waiting for the disease to take hold?

Was I going to create another new intelligent clone of myself, when trigger respawn plucked my soul out and left my body to this disease? I probably should have thought of that earlier... Too late to worry about it now, but it seemed unlikely; novice empath actually responded to the drones. They weren't dead. There were, in fact, alive and *very* happy.

I continued walking, and my entourage followed, walking in perfect synchronisation. There seemed to be no communication going on, and no-one had taken the lead. They were moving as a single organism. Maybe they were drones in a more literal sense than I'd imagined, being controlled directly, rather than having their minds warped? Or, given what I was feeling from novice empath, maybe a combination of the two? How would that even work?

As I drew closer, the air grew sweeter. The great cloud of miasma faded away, revealing the scenery beyond. An enormous tree, hundreds of metres in height. The vines were its roots, connecting at the base of its trunk. The first branches didn't start for tens of metres, and they were completely bare of leaves. The bark was blackened, looking almost burnt. If I didn't know better, and couldn't see the amount of mana flowing into it, I'd have thought it dead.

It was beautiful.

I still had ten minutes before trigger respawn fired, so I set about exploring the area. The way down was easy enough to find, an open staircase at the base of the tree, built into a platform of white marble, with more vines trailing down it. There was no point in heading down there now, though. Instead, I continued to look around, seeing dozens of the drones climbing about the tree's branches. What they were doing up there, I had no idea, but they certainly looked busy. I saw one stop and twitch, novice empath telling me it was in utter ecstasy. Maybe I should go and get a closer look? But how was I supposed to climb the trunk?

Using spider claws as climbing picks? Or even taking the extra limbs skill and using my own claws? But both options would damage the trunk. A difficult problem indeed, so I lay back to think. I could make myself a grappling hook by tying a spider claw to a length of silk?

I was distracted from my planning by something tapping against me, and opened my eyes to see a couple of the drones poking at me. Odd, but they didn't seem to be doing any harm, so I ignored them, closing my eyes once more.

Evolution conditions met: Disease nullification ranks up to disease immunity

Dirty water, contaminated food or infected wounds are all things that an adventurer needs to be wary of,

even before considering even worse things like undead blight or magical plagues. You have survived a necrotising virus, a massive parasite infestation, a parasite of great power, the guidance and even the dreaded undead blight, feats for which your nullification has been upgraded to immunity. This skill turns the interior of your body into a fortress, and only the most virulent of diseases have any effect on you. It will also alert you when your body is under attack by disease, and what symptoms to expect.

I opened my eyes again, this time back in the catacombs, and sighed. More mind fuckery. Given the description, and a name like the guidance, that wasn't a complete surprise, but the subtlety of it had taken me by surprise. Presumably it wasn't magical, given that my mind magic resistance didn't react. Some sort of pheromone based thing? I'd thought the air had grown sweet when the scent hadn't changed at all. If anything, it had got worse. I'd thought a dead-looking, burnt tree had been beautiful. I hadn't taken the stairs, even though that was my aim, and if I'd found a shrine at the bottom, I could have respawned there to skip the fourth floor. I'd wanted to climb the tree, but had been worried about hurting it. I'd let a bunch of drones...

That made me sit upright pretty quickly. What had they been doing?

I tried to store my armour, to give myself an inspection, and found that I *couldn't*. The appraisal results showed a couple of points drop in the quality rating, but it was otherwise unchanged, so not cursed. My item box shouldn't suddenly be full, but dropping out a couple of panther corpses just in case made no difference. The only other thing I knew of that would make item box fail was if I tried to store something living.

As if trying to confirm the theory, I felt something brush against my arm, on the inside of my armour. Then I had the same feeling on a leg. With some amount of alarm, I tried to inspect where the monsters had been touching, and saw movement. A small amount of silk pushed outwards, then split, and the tip of a small vine poked out. I could see it still growing!

They must have been planting seeds over me. All the drones had been vined, so this must be where they came from, rather than being a symptom of the guidance. They'd been in the middle of preparing me for becoming a drone, but must have been unfamiliar with the concept of clothing, or the human type, at least, and hadn't bothered removing my armour first.

Now what? Removing my armour *required* the use of item box! I'd have to cut it off, clean out the vine infestation and repair it. I pulled my sword out of my item box, grasped the hilt, and my arm seized up.

That wasn't good... I strained and heard the noise of cracking wood, giving me some movement back. I made another attempt to start cutting my armour off, but fighting against the restricting vines left me without the strength to slice the spider queen's silk. Damn my armour for being *too* strong.

I could *feel* the vines regrowing, wrapping around my limbs, growing lower until they reached my hand. They forced it open, causing me to drop the sword. Something intelligent was obviously controlling them, given that they hadn't restricted my movement until I'd tried to remove them. They *still* weren't restricting my movement, at least until I reached to grab the sword, at which my arm locked up again.

I made an attempt with a dagger, swinging my arm and pulling it out of my item box mid-swing, to not give my puppeteer a chance to stop me. It didn't try, jerking my other arm backwards instead, out of the way of the attack. So something intelligent, but at least it wasn't in my head; it didn't react until after I pulled the dagger from item box, so it didn't have advance warning of my plan. It must be able to see me, though, given that it reacted to the dagger summoning.

The vines were still growing, and I could feel them snaking around my torso, wrapping themselves around my stomach. My chest. My breasts. Sliding against my crotch.

So, apparently I now needed to add living tentacle armour to my growing list of bondage predicaments.

Chapter 17: Playing Both Sides

I wasn't panicking, but only because friend of fear wouldn't let me. I should have been. My own armour had turned against me, threaded through with vines under something else's control. Something that could perceive me, and react to my attempts to remove it. Respawnng wouldn't help, nor would my other skills. It was letting me move around normally as long as I made no attempt to free myself, but I suspected the only reason for that was to give the vines a chance to grow. If the existing vines could mostly restrain me already, then with a bit more growth, they would be able to control me like a puppet on strings. Whatever I did, I needed to act fast.

I could see two options. I could walk back towards the fourth floor on my own, which I imagined was what the vine's controller wanted, so I doubt they would stop me, and hope my zombie twin could free me when I reached her. Alternatively, dragon. His flame breath would doubtless purge the vines, and if the control over the vines was limited by distance, jumping to the top floor might weaken them, or take me out of range completely.

On the basis that I'd end up crossing through the throne room regardless, and that the vines were bad enough already without getting blighted, I decided to try the dragon first. I placed a hand against the statue and invoked fast travel, hurrying towards the dragon's chamber the moment I arrived.

My whole body locked up as soon as I started running, sending me sprawling to the floor.

"Why do you flee, my wayward child? Return to your home, and enjoy the bliss of servitude."

The heck? My armour was *speaking* to me now? I wasn't going to justify it with a response, so I concentrated on making it to the dragon. Trying to stand was a losing proposition, but I still had enough movement to drag myself along the floor. The corridor wasn't a long one.

"Your efforts are pointless, and will only lead to pain."

The vines constricted, crushing my limbs and torso. I couldn't breathe, but despite the claims of the mysterious speaker, there was no pain. It didn't know about my pain immunity skill, and it didn't know about the dragon. Even if it could see what I was doing, that was all it could do. I kept crawling, desperately trying to suck in what air I could. It wasn't enough, but I didn't have far to go.

"Naughty children must be punished."

The vines squeezed harder, but they didn't seem to have enough strength in them to break my bones. One of them wrapped around my throat, crushing it completely. It didn't matter; I was seconds away from getting vaporised. I saw no point in stopping.

"But good children will be rewarded."

Without letting up on the restrictions, the vines began to massage my intimate areas. Yup, stereotypical rapey living tentacle armour indeed. I was hardly going to let *that* convince me to stop. Besides, my zombie twin was better.

Suffocation tolerance advanced to level 3

I made it to the entrance, and saw the dragon open one slitted eye, just before I collapsed from lack of oxygen.

"Oh," came the voice of my armour, and I stood up and turned away, no longer in control of my body. The vines forced me to start running, and suffocating as I was, I had no strength to resist. It didn't matter. My controller wasn't fast enough, and I saw the red glare reflecting off the rock in front of me moments before the flame hit.

Heat tolerance advanced to level 6

That worked well, I thought, as I woke back up in my nightie with not a vine in sight. My magical duplicating nightie was weird. If I died while wearing it, it didn't teleport with me, but I got a fresh one. If I died naked, I likewise got a fresh one. If I died wearing something else, it didn't turn up. Very convenient for preserving my modesty, but how did it know?

So, there had been a bit of a hiccup there, but I'd successfully got my disease immunity skill. Hopefully, that would be enough to avoid me willingly letting the drones plant seeds into me again. Was it the tree that was speaking to me? This world had some very strange ideas about the proper behaviour of a tree, given the first one I'd seen, then all the crystal ones, and now this new cavern-sized one.

I'd also had my armour completely destroyed. Whether any of the chitin had survived, I didn't know, but even if it had, it obviously hadn't been considered equipment at the point I respawned.

Improvisational artisan advanced to level 15

Thank goodness for my oversized item box and plentiful resources. This time, with my strength further enhanced by my magical ring, I used more of the giant centipede chitin, but I still wasn't strong enough to fashion the entire thing from it. There would still be weak spots. Then again, the best armour in the world wouldn't save me if I lay down and let my enemies have their way with me. Or let a slime fall on my head and block my nose and mouth.

Armour remade, I stepped out into the catacombs, happy to discover that the ambient blight had no effect on me whatsoever. A good start. Then it was to the throne room, regaling my zombie twin with a quick catch-up on everything that had happened since my last visit, and then down the stairs and out into the cavern.

Where a group of nine *carnes multiformis* guards stood behind a lone specimen, lumpy and misshapen. Unless I was mistaken, it was the elder from the first village. He was... male? Yes, male, but still a little different from the second village. The guards behind him were similar. Six male and three female, but not the same male and female as those from the second village. All ten of them were wearing the rock camouflage perfume. The English-speaking elder being this far away, camouflaged, implied that they were here waiting for me.

"Again you return, immortal one," he said, his pronunciation much better this time. He must have been practising.

The guards stood with their spears pointed upwards, in their stance of non-aggression. This was strange...

"Immortal one?"

"You come from the path of death and undeath. One at a time, and the next shares the knowledge of the last. You are the same being that has visited us twice already, and our ancient enemy once."

To be fair, short of not dying, it was hard to keep that secret, so I couldn't complain too much about them noticing.

"And what is it that my twice murderers want, waiting for me with so many guards?"

The elder shuffled, in one of the few mannerisms I could recognise without the aid of novice empathy. He was nervous.

"We wish for your help in defeating the guidance," he said.

I stared in disbelief, but he said nothing further. Apparently he was serious. "And why, exactly, would I help after you murdered me twice?"

"Once, when you trespassed on our land and ignored our warnings to leave, continued to move towards our village when attacked, then failed to explain yourself when captured and questioned. We knew not

what you were. That you couldn't perceive our markers, speak our language, or even comprehend our threats, was not something we considered. Our enemies would have treated you in exactly the same way, had you headed in that direction first."

That... made sense. And it was true the second village knew who I was before I got there. If they hadn't, would they have attacked me too? "And the second?" I asked.

"You appeared in the middle of our village without warning, and the first thing you said was to point out our killing of your predecessor. That you had come for revenge was a natural assumption, so we switched from requesting cooperation to a show of force. Even so, you were not supposed to die. When it was noticed that your first corpse was infected with guidance yet showed no symptoms, we wanted a live sample. The dose you were infected with was not intended to be fatal."

That was less plausible. If I was there for revenge, I wouldn't have hung around for so long without doing anything. And that hardly excused them using me as a human lab rat. "So, you have prepared excuses, but that doesn't answer why I'd want to help you."

The bundle of flesh and limbs shuffled around again. I rather suspected his opinion was that I had *no* reason to want to help him. "You have already made a deal with our enemies, and got nothing out of it," he said. "Were you to use their shrine to teleport, they plan to immediately confine you under the guise of ensuring you are not infected, while using you to conduct further research. You are not welcome there as a guest, regardless of their promise."

Just like the second village seemed to know everything that went on in the first, the reverse also seemed to be true. Was half the population of each village spies or something? "And I suppose you would claim that you would welcome me instead?"

"No. We promise no further deception. I cannot claim you would be welcome in our village, because you will not be. We offer precious goods instead."

That gave me pause. If they had offered me the same deal as the other village, I wouldn't have been interested. I'd already got a deal with their species recorded against my class, and beyond its use as an emergency respawn point, I had no reason to want to visit. A one off trade of goods for blood was far more enticing. "What sort of goods?" I asked.

The monstrosity in front of me remained silent for a few seconds before answering. "We do not wish to make the same mistake again. What we consider precious may not be so for you. You have not shown interest in the crystal harvested from the roots of the great tree."

What could they offer me? More magic items would be nice, but given their insane physiology, I couldn't imagine anything they made would fit me. Unless they had enchanted scents. That would be cool. A better option would be mana crystals, though. I still had some of Ja'yakril's, but not enough to repair a shrine with, and I had a couple from the arch-mage, which were larger but by no means the biggest I'd seen. "Do you have mana crystals? The spheres taken from monsters capable of using magic? Something worth more than a thousand mana?"

Yes, that was far more than I needed to repair a shrine, but the bonus quest rewards for larger offerings were often better than the default one. If there was the possibility of earning a third class, I wasn't going to turn it down. If they turned out to only have smaller ones, I'd take whatever I could get away with. They had, after all, murdered me. I didn't see the need to play nice.

"We possess a number of such crystals. I do not know what measurement units you use for mana, but some of them are large, and would surely meet your requirements. We would be willing to trade one of our larger ones for your aid."

Cool. A new mana crystal, ready to earn my next level-up, and maybe something more. I'd take that.

Besides, it would let me get a feel for my new disease immunity somewhere well away from any drones trying to plant seeds in me. The only problems were of trust and logistics. Given their prior behaviour, I didn't want to enter their village without the safety net of trigger respawn, but an hour wouldn't be enough time. I'd need to rely on sense danger to let me fire trigger respawn at short notice.

"Very well. I agree," I answered. I would rather both villages develop a defence anyway, rather than helping one to win.

The elder did an odd little jump, the fingers of the three limbs in contact with the ground clenching together and launching him a short distance into the air. Novice empath told me it was an expression of happiness. It almost reminded me of a guinea pig popcorn, except that, unlike these monstrosities, guinea pigs were cute.

Novice empath advanced to level 10

Evolution conditions met: Novice empath ranks up to proficient empath

A good adventurer should always know what their opponent is thinking. Allowing an enemy's calm facade to mask their seething rage is a good way to end up with a knife in your back. After reading a wide range of species from an aranea regina to the carnes multiformis, you have earned this upgrade from novice to proficient. This skill will help you read facial, body, voice or other cues to let you know your opponent's emotions and intent.

Added bonus. Apparently I could read intent now? Was that like the fox-kin truth-sense? Shame I didn't have it at the start of that negotiation.

I followed the group back towards the first village. Alas, while I'd only been concerned with what would happen once we arrived, a sudden rain of crystal arrows reminded me I should have spared a thought for the journey first.

Chapter 18: War

Sense danger advanced to level 5

I followed the advice of my skill and took a step to the side, just as a crystal arrow shattered against the ground where I'd previously been standing. Our group of guards had spears only, and couldn't fight back, reduced to defending themselves against the storm of arrows. To be fair, they were doing every bit as well as I was, at least until the ground shook and their dodging faltered. Four of them were hit in the next volley, bleeding a clear liquid I assumed was their equivalent of blood. The three limbs one of them was standing on buckled, and he fell to the ground.

The elder had built walls of rock around himself the moment the attack started, and hadn't said a word. It seemed he wouldn't be any use here. The guards were silent, and, despite the slew of injuries, smug. That was an odd emotion, given how outmatched they were.

Light flashed in the distance, the first I'd seen on this floor. Again and again, and it was accompanied by noises that suggested something very unpleasant happening to something soft and squishy. Or many somethings. The barrage of arrows stopped, and the wall of rock folded itself back into the ground.

"I apologise for the interruption," he said, continuing to walk, or perhaps roll, as if nothing had happened. The guards followed, three of them picking up the one that was unable to walk under his own power.

"Wait, what just happened?" I asked.

"Obviously, it wasn't only us who noticed where you came from. The other village was watching too. I imagine they ignored us at first, expecting you to rebuff us or attack. When you didn't, they launched an ambush to prevent us from taking you to our village. We expected that and had a second party ready to ambush the ambushers. They'll protect us for the rest of the way, and our enemy won't have time to

organise a sufficiently large force to counter them, so the remaining journey should be uneventful."

"And you didn't think to warn me? What happened to promising no deceptions?"

The elder stopped, giving me his full attention. "I apologise again. Once more, I seem to have taken something for granted that wasn't obvious to you. We are at war, and are bringing a valuable asset to our village. It would be natural for our enemy to do their best to prevent us reaching our destination, so I failed to consider the need to mention the possibility."

I blinked. When he phrased it like that, it *was* obvious. Keeping a separate squad like that stank of using me as bait, but that probably wasn't it at all. Proficient empath was telling me the elder was completely sincere. He'd simply thought the second village launching an attack was so obvious that he hadn't needed to mention it, and the second squad was the best strategy. If those extra defenders had been waiting for me in the open, the second village might have fetched a larger attack force. Or if those defenders should have been protecting the village, they could have launched an attack there instead of on me.

I was lacking the proper mindset for a war. Even if it was only two villages, they seemed to be legitimately trying to kill each other, and I'd been casually strolling around their battlefield. Of *course* they'd attacked me for entering their territory. In these circumstances, why would they assume anything other than me being a spy, or new type of weapon?

The ten members of this party were all wearing camouflage, but I wasn't. I probably stood out like a beacon to our attackers. They were taking a big risk travelling with me like this.

The remainder of the journey was indeed uneventful, and I entered their village safely. It was a very different place with my new sense. The buildings, which I had thought built from plain, unadorned stone, were suddenly covered in colourful patterns. The residents were walking around in a wide variety of outfits. They had *writing*. I couldn't understand it, but there were patterns of scents above doorways and on signs that were clearly not decorative.

Was this why their names weren't pronounceable? They couldn't be rendered into any combination of English letters because they were scent based instead of sound? What a strange society. An interesting one, but completely alien.

Also, a suspicious one. My olfactory perception let me smell the difference between genders. The appraisal information told me there should be four, yet every pedestrian we passed was one of two. A *different* two from the few I'd smelt belonging to the other village. And that other village had accused this one of kidnap.

"Has the other village been kidnapping your females?" I asked, my suspicions growing to a full theory.

"Yesss," answered the elder, his pronunciation slipping. He was angry, but I was reasonably sure it wasn't at me.

Thought so; neither village was self sufficient. They *need* each other to reproduce. "So, when you win the war, and wipe out the other village in its entirety, what happens next?"

The elder didn't answer, but I doubted they were that stupid. They would wipe out the fighters of the other village and enslave the rest. How had they split apart like this? There was no way this was sustainable. How long would Earth last if war broke out between our two genders? This situation was insane.

"How did the war start?" I asked.

"A xkkcrckt assassin poisoned our ruling council. The despicable cowards."

He slipped back into native for a moment there. Was that the name of the other village? The collective word for the other pair of genders? Something else completely?

It wasn't my problem. I'd get my mana crystal, then get out of here. If my disease immunity let me past the tree, awesome. If not... Could I make myself a silk hazmat suit and get suffocation tolerance high enough that cutting off my air supply for that long wouldn't be a problem? Or what would happen if I started cutting the vines, and choked off the tree's mana supply?

Once again, *where were my damn fireballs?* Why did I not pick flame mage for my second class?

...I'm going to need to befriend the damn dragon, aren't I? Although, even then, I'd probably just get scales or a tail, instead of the flame breath I actually wanted. Still, being part dragon would be far cooler than being part spider or centipede. How would I get him to stop flaming me at first sight?

We reached a structure which was once again labelled in some way I couldn't read, where an overly excited researcher deprived me of quite a lot of blood in exchange for a sizeable mana crystal. I knew size wasn't a perfect indicator of power, and it was a pity appraisal didn't give me any hints. With my increased sense mana level, and comparing it to others I'd seen, I was certain it was over five hundred, but also that it was nowhere near the giant centipede's. Not quite what I was hoping for, but it would do.

With that safely stored, it was time for another stint in a stone prison, with only a broken off pod for company. Unlike the second village, this one was carrying out their experimentation on the inside, but that didn't mean they were any less afraid of it. I debated using trigger respawn, and decided that I should. Given the subtle mind-altering effects, I didn't want to get trapped in a situation where I mistakenly thought I was fine and chose not to activate it later. The *carnes multiformis* only wanted my infected corpse, anyway, and were planning to poison the prison after leaving me for some time, so I didn't even need to admit to my suicide, or that their poison probably wouldn't achieve much.

A mage freed the pod from its stone cocoon, and sealed me in.

"I see you," hissed the pod, a low-pitched, slow voice, sounding remarkably like that of my armour earlier. "You, whose spirit can abandon your body. Who has survived a dragon's breath. I will *consume* you. I will feed on your secrets. I will feast on all that you are, and you will be *nothing*."

"Wow. How villainous... Are you about to start monologuing? Please don't, I'm trapped in here with you."

"Your frivolity. Your sarcasm. I will *take* them."

Huh? It understood emotions? "For a giant tree, you..."

Alas, my complaint was interrupted by the pod not just squirting the usual mist from its tip, but splitting fully down the middle, shrivelling up, dead, but spraying the biggest cloud of pathogen I'd seen out into the air and filling the prison with dense fog. I coughed and spluttered as I stored my torch and covered my own face with silk, making very little difference.

Disease nullification had the feature of letting me know when my body was under attack, but disease immunity let me know in detail what the attack was trying to do. This was no bacterial or viral infection. Countless millions of microscopic seeds were landing on my skin, or ending up in my lungs, where they germinated and sent tiny filaments into my body, wrapping themselves around nerves, plugging into muscles and parasitising my blood vessels. Some seeds made it into my bloodstream and were transported to my brain, germinating there. No wonder mind magic resistance did nothing; this wasn't magic. It was quite literally rewiring my brain.

First the blight, and then this. Both diseases were utterly insane, if this could even be called a disease. No way in heck were they natural. Were they made by the Goddess, just as thematic background for the dungeon floors? How many thousands had I killed with the blight? The thought that a deity had produced them as decoration was as insane as the diseases themselves.

Disease immunity might have had an exaggerated name, but it was trying its best, and I could feel the

microscopic tendrils dying off almost as fast as they could grow. Almost. The dose I'd been hit with was too high to deal with completely. Whatever consciousness was in control here was again showing alarming levels of intelligence. Did it know I was resistant, and hit me with such a high dose to overcome it? During my last respawn, it hadn't been able to read my mind, but I hadn't had all this gunk in my head. Could it do so now?

My last time being so badly infested I'd had no idea what was actually happening. Now that I did, my skill informing me as the plant matter invaded deeper and deeper into my body, it was harder to be so sanguine about the experience. It was hard to resist the urge to slit my own throat there and then. But I'd made a deal and would stick to it.

"Still you fight," I said, which was interesting, because I hadn't intended to. "You will become a part of me, as will all life. Your struggles are meaningless."

"Oi, get your filthy vines off my voice box!" I replied to myself.

"Your voice is mine. Your body is mine. *You* are mine."

'*Like hell I am,*' I tried to shout, but I couldn't. Well, there's yet another one for my bondage diaries; I had a plant growing in my brain and spinal cord, robbing me of my own ability to move and leaving me lying perfectly still on the floor. It was even *breathing* for me, which was a strange experience. Dammit, I should have cut my throat while I had the chance! But my mind was still clear, this time. Or at least, I *thought* it was. Maybe that was being faked, too? I wasn't enjoying the musty smell of my sealed stone room, or feeling relaxed and blissed out like last time, so on the balance of probability, I thought I was safe.

The scent of the air changed, but not in the direction of sweetness. Quite the opposite. It was far earlier than planned, but presumably my situation was being monitored, and those outside knew the pod had self destructed and that I'd started talking to myself. They'd started pumping in poison.

"Not yet. It's not time!" my mouth said. Time for what? But at least that confirmed it still wasn't reading my mind, because whatever poison was in the air wasn't enough to overcome my poison immunity. It was doing nothing to me, and I still had half an hour before trigger respawn kicked in. I had no body control, so couldn't suicide. It still had plenty of time to do whatever it wanted to do, so its frustration was meaningless.

"You *will* return to me willingly," the plant said through me. "Let me give you a taste of how your obedience will be rewarded."

My body flushed with heat, and thanks to my skills telling me exactly what the 'disease' was doing, I knew why. It had just knocked my hormones completely out of balance, and it felt *good*. I wanted to moan and squirm, but was completely unable to, the parasitic plant holding even my breathing steady as I lay motionless on the ground. I remembered the drones I'd met, and how blissed out they had all been...

So, this was finally going to happen. There was no way out of this one by biting off an offending organ or dragging myself to a friendly neighbourhood dragon. Even if I dunked hardening fluid on myself again, I wouldn't suffocate in time. I was left a prisoner in my own body as the heat built up, and remained just as helpless when the plant directly stimulated my nerves, instantly delivering me into the biggest orgasm of my life, the pleasure rolling on and on until my mind went completely blank.

Chapter 19: Dragon

Disease immunity advanced to level 31

I woke up at the catacombs' shrine, shuddering at the memories. Okay, I needed to take back my previous comment about my zombie twin being better, but interfacing directly with my nerves and brain was

downright cheating. But despite the mind blank, there was no way that had been half an hour. I wasn't at all lucid by the end, but I was pretty sure I'd had a heart attack. The tree had literally pleased me to death, just to show me what my reward would be if I cooperated.

So, naturally, I fast travelled straight back to the top floor. If I needed any more evidence that it couldn't read my mind, that was it. If it thought some sort of magical rape was going to get me to willingly submit, it was badly mistaken, however good it felt. I hadn't been this angry since the giant centipede had mind-fucked me. That tree was going to *burn*.

I stormed my way down the dragon's passage and into his cavern.

"Hi," I called. "Please..."

Heat tolerance advanced to level 7

I sighed back in at the upstairs shrine, where I'd moved my respawn point, and once again made my way down the corridor.

"Please can..."

Heat tolerance advanced to level 8

"Would..."

Heat tolerance advanced to level 9

"..."

Heat tolerance advanced to level 10

Evolution conditions met: Heat tolerance ranks up to heat resistance

Fire is one of the more common elements of magic, and is used by mages and monsters alike, but magic isn't required to create excessive heat. Maybe an adventure will take you to a desert, or a lava filled dungeon. You have, somehow, survived the fiery breath of an adult draco rubrum. Repeatedly. Yes, you've earned this upgrade from tolerance to resistance, but you could have done something slightly saner. There's no bonus for outrageousness, you know? In any case, this skill greatly increases the upper end of the temperature range in which you can comfortably operate, and reduces the damage when you go beyond your limit.

Well, that was mean. He didn't even wait for me to step into his cavern that time! Still, if he thought that was enough to put me off, he was sorely mistaken.

I hadn't wanted to piss off the big, scary dragon before. To be fair, I *still* didn't, but that was outweighed by wanting to burn every last vine on the fourth floor. I marched down the passage for the fifth time, and this time shouted from around the corner.

"I only want to talk! Could you please stop flaming me?"

What was the saying? Hope for the best but prepare for the worst? However it was supposed to be worded, the principle of it was obvious enough, and that principle was why I shouted out while hiding behind a massive chunk of centipede shell, despite being around a corner without direct line of sight to the dragon. Sure enough, moments later, the corridor lit up in red. Between the indirect hit, my freshly evolved heat resistance and my damage reducing shield proficiency, I actually survived without too much damage.

"Look," I shouted. "I'm immortal, and will keep coming back however many times you incinerate me. You'd be better off..." I stopped and hid behind my shield again and another, longer flood of flame covered the corridor. "...dealing with me now so that I go away."

A long, sleepy sigh came from the cavern. "Fine, you pest." The dragon rumbled. "What is it you want?"

"To burn an evil tree to ashes," I answered, walking down the corridor, which by this point was layered with smooth glass. "But I imagine you don't want to do that in person."

The dragon opened one eye, an orb easily three metres in diameter, and glared at me. "I don't have the patience to talk in riddles. Just tell me what it will take to make you go away."

"I just need to make some sort of mutually beneficial deal. It makes no difference what it's for, as long as it's in both of our interests. I'd like a mana crystal, if you have any. What sort of thing would you want? I have a few magical items, or if you like eating meat, I have an unlimited supply of that."

"Here," growled the dragon, flicking a claw and launching a sphere at me that glowed to sense mana with an order of magnitude greater intensity than the one I'd got from the carnes multiformis. "You and your nonsensical blessing. All I require from you in return is an oath to never, ever return to this cavern, under any circumstance, or send anyone else here on your behalf, or otherwise do anything to disturb me or take anything from my hoard."

Wow. He *really* wanted to be left alone. And knew about my blessing, somehow... I'd never had the chance to inspect his hoard, having been flamed within seconds of arrival every previous time I'd been here, but there was certainly a lot of shiny in the cave, and *hundreds* of things responding to sense mana, some of them very brightly. One corner was shining so brilliantly I couldn't even pick out individual items.

"Fine, if that's all you want, I'll promise. I'll have to try not to get infected by parasitic vines again, but I'm sure I'll manage. Doesn't seem like you get much out of it, though. I can't be *that* annoying, surely?"

"Believe me, I get plenty out of it," he growled. "And now it's time for you to leave," he added, opening his muzzle wide.

"Wa..."

Heat resistance advanced to level 11

Seriously?!

For swearing an oath to a draco rubrum, you gain draconic wings.

My shoulders cracked and burnt, my skin heaving, bulging and bursting. I felt blood cascading down my back as new sensations came flooding in from parts of my body that shouldn't exist. Loud, uncomfortable crunching came from behind me, and I could *feel* things shifting. Leathery slithering followed, and I watched my shadow as new shapes extended out of it.

With trepidation, I reached behind me, shuddering as I touched my sensitive new wings, still damp with my blood. Each wing extended out by a metre, and reached from my shoulders to my waist. At least I could fold them in, so I wouldn't be getting stuck in any doorways.

And there went any last hope I had of pretending to be normal-ish back on Earth, if I kept my abilities... No. Actually, fuck it. If it meant I got to fly, I didn't care. Being able to fly would be well worth having to fight off the media and an occasional mad scientist. Still, wings weren't fire breath, so weren't quite what I wanted. What new skill options did I get?

Draconic might: You gain a large increase to physical strength

Draconic breath (red): You can exhale high temperature flames

There it was! It was fortunate I'd kept a skill spare. It meant I wouldn't find out what happened if I levelled while still having a skill slot open, but no matter. Fire breath!

Being melted five times in a row had given me a chance to calm down, and I was no longer quite so apoplectic. Just because I'd finally got my grubby mitts on a bit of fire didn't mean I immediately needed

to go running back to the evil tree. I should start on a smaller target. Some slimes, for example. And I needed to modify my armour to account for the wings that now sprouted from my back. That task could potentially use a second pair of hands, given that I couldn't see behind myself, so I fast travelled back to the catacombs and made my way to the throne room.

"Hey," called my zombie twin as I entered. "Dunno if you've noticed, but you've got something on your back."

"Oh, have I?" I asked. "No, I didn't have a clue. Thanks for pointing it out."

"So, you've been talking to the dragon, I assume? What brought that on? Last I remember, we were terrified of causing him to take notice of us?"

"The next floor down has an endemic disease almost as bad as the blight, except it's not really a disease. Some giant tree in the middle of the floor releases microscopic seeds which parasitise the brain and take control of anything they infect, and it promises great pleasure in exchange for willingly submitting to it. Then it plants larger seeds into its slaves to turn them into more or less complete drones. It seems to want to assimilate all life in the dungeon. It's worked out my respawn trick, and that respawning clears my brain out, so my last life, it decided to give me an example of the reward I'd get if I behaved myself in the hopes I'd willingly go and get myself infested again."

"Ah, I see. And so you decided to drop all your previous plans and forget all about your mission to find the holy sword, in favour of burning this tree down?"

"Yup."

"And you decided that the best way of going about that was to bug a *dragon* into giving you some sort of deal, hoping that your second class gave you dragon breath?"

I shuffled a bit in embarrassment. In the confines of my own head, my plan hadn't sounded quite so rash. "Maybe?"

The zombie queen gave a big, theatrical sigh. "I'm not even mad. Just disappointed. And maybe a little jealous. Where's *my* wings?"

"I have fire breath too, but I had to spend a skill slot on it. What do my wings look like, anyway? I don't have a mirror."

"Big, red and scaly. Not particularly ladylike, I'm afraid. But I doubt you'd care, as long as you can fly."

I could see that much, but I suppose it's not as if she could paint me a picture. The tops of my wings were thick and curved, with a spine-like run of bones throughout and a sharp point of horn protruding from each bone. The membranes were thin and leathery, but the entire wing was covered in red scales, and was rigid despite the lack of any further bone reinforcements. I couldn't see exactly how they folded up, or how things shifted when I flapped them.

"I haven't actually tried yet. Or my breath. I was going to go breathe fire over the slimes downstairs, then try out my wings in the wide open cavern where I'll be less likely to crash into anything."

"Anything other than the floor, you mean."

I glared at my zombie twin. "Oh ye of little faith. Fine, let's see what I can do."

I stretched out my wings to their full span, which, while large for such purposes as walking through doorways, didn't seem at all appropriate for flight. No way should they be enough to lift me off the ground, but the strange starfish had already proven physics was an optional extra in this world. I gave them a single, forceful flap, and it propelled me three metres up into the air.

I hadn't been expecting that, and wasn't at all ready for it. Three metres wasn't *that* high, but was still a bit

far to fall from unexpectedly. I desperately flapped again, but had twisted in the air, and propelled myself forward instead of upward, clipping a pillar and bouncing head first towards the floor. I stuck out an arm on reflex.

Crack.

Blunt damage tolerance advanced to level 3

"Wow. Not content with wings, you also managed to pick up an extra elbow."

"It was my first ever time!" I shouted back, trying to shove my arm into an approximately correct position and tie it there with silk. I was going to need a respawn to deal with the broken bones, but I might as well get some more flight training in first. It was bad enough losing one life while trying to fly, and I had no intention of risking more.

"Imagine what would happen if every bird broke a limb on their first time flying. I'm afraid that's not an excuse."

Ignoring the peanut gallery, I tried again with smaller flaps, and managed to bob around in the air for a bit without further mishap. Trying to fly around was harder, and I had more than one further unplanned encounter with pillars, the ceiling, the floor and on one occasion even my twin, earning two more levels of blunt damage tolerance.

"I really should have done this somewhere with more space and a soft floor," I muttered while my zombie twin helpfully splinted my broken leg, which I wasn't able to do myself on account of both my arms being broken.

"Yes, you *should* have, but that wouldn't have been anywhere near as funny."

DupliKatie helped me back to my one good foot, and I tried to make another attempt, only to find one wing would no longer flap properly. I must have caught it on a pillar during my last attempt. "I think one of my wings is broken. I'll have to stop there."

"Aww. Okay, in that case, on to your flame breath! Just aim it away from me, please."

I obligingly turned around to face a wall, took a deep breath in and activated the skill as I exhaled, filling my throat with flames.

Heat resistance advanced to level 12

"..." I said, as the charred remains of my throat collapsed, followed shortly after by the rest of me.

Chapter 20: Heartburn

When I woke back up at the shrine, I found myself surrounded by zombies. In perfect synchronisation, they pointed at me, then emitted a single, "Ha ha."

I bet dupliKatie had been practising her control over them for precisely that moment. With a huff, I got back up and made my way to the throne room, ignoring the spectating blighted husks. "Was that necessary?" I complained at her.

"Nope," she answered happily. "So, how many levels of heat resistance do you think you need to be able to actually use your new skill?"

That was unfair! If my wings could abuse physics so blatantly, why couldn't my fire breath? Still, given the instadeath, 'surviving' it probably counted as an achievement, and my enhanced resistance focus would count as a third, so I could evolve it to heat nullification. I just needed to commit suicide with my flame breath repeatedly. At least the patch of wall I'd aimed at looked scorched, so I did actually have some power available, and wasn't just breathing out warm air.

"Well?" asked my zombie twin.

"I currently have it at level twelve, and can probably take it to thirty. That *should* be enough to not immediately die."

"At least until you enhance it."

"Or enhancing it might give me an asbestos throat. You never know."

"Nice how you can keep such optimism after everything that's happened to you. Now, get a move on. You have at least eighteen suicides to get through!"

With another huff, I turned back to the wall and gave it another dose of flame.

Heat resistance advanced to level 13

And so continued the next half hour or so, at least from my perspective. In real time, I spent over a day dying repeatedly. The blunt damage tolerance boosts had reminded me I really should get other damage tolerances if possible; I'd been in two minds about it because it risked preventing me from suicide by throat slitting, but the only time I'd actually wanted to slit my throat recently I hadn't been able to for bondage reasons. It wouldn't be a great loss.

Cutting and stabbing myself immediately granted me piercing and cutting damage tolerance skills, and thanks to my enhanced resistance focus, I could evolve them with no achievements required. My procedure became wake up, stab or cut myself repeatedly, then breathe flame straight up into the air until death. I didn't even bother to stand up first.

Evolution conditions met: Heat resistance ranks up to heat nullification

Fire is one of the more common elements of magic, and is used by mages and monsters alike, but magic isn't required to create excessive heat. Maybe an adventure will take you to a desert, or a lava filled dungeon. You have survived the fiery breath of an adult draco rubrum, as well as major internal burns carbonising important parts of your body. For these achievements, you have earned this upgrade from resistance to nullification. This skill greatly increases the upper end of the temperature range in which you can comfortably operate, and shields you from dangerously high temperatures.

Evolution conditions met: Piercing damage tolerance ranks up to piercing damage resistance

Spears, poniards, arrows, or even a club with a nail in it, plenty of weapons work by concentrating a force onto a small spot, piercing into their target. This skill will make your body harder to pierce.

Evolution conditions met: Cutting damage tolerance ranks up to cutting damage resistance

Swords, axes, chakrams or scythes, plenty of weapons work by concentrating a large force into a sharp edge. This skill will make your body harder to cut.

Evolution conditions met: Curse resistance ranks up to curse nullification

Not all magical attacks aim to deliver raw damage. Sleep, weakness or paralysis are common effects. Having quickly recovered from the sleep and paralysis magics of a powerful mage, you have earned this upgrade from resistance to nullification. This skill will offer significant aid towards rejecting the negative effects of curses, and will alert you when you are afflicted with a curse.

My sword of paralysis, which had previously only levelled curse resistance to twelve, had given me one more level, either from the quantity of attacks I'd made against myself, or from my enhanced resistance focus. That took it to twenty and gave me a new evolution. My physical damage resistances capped at twenty, with no achievements to evolve them further. As for heat nullification, even capped at thirty, I could only breathe flame for five seconds before suffering fatal burns.

That wasn't as harsh a limit as it seemed; even if I was completely immune, I couldn't do much better. It consumed mana at such a rate that five seconds drained it by more than half.

That had been a seriously productive day of training. Alas, none of it would actually help against the tree. Or even against the carnes multiformis, aside from them needing to stab a little harder with their spears. Maybe I should fly into things some more to boost my blunt resistance?

Deciding that I'd done enough training for now, and I was overdue some revenge against the slimes, I finally stood back up and made my way back towards the throne room. I made it three steps before my brain unhelpfully informed me something was out of place, without telling me what.

Peering around the room, it took me far too long to spot the problem. My corpses were gone! There should be more than two dozen, yet I hadn't seen a single one the whole time I'd been training. Shrine rooms cleaned up around themselves, but had never, in my experience, removed full corpses.

...The blighted husks that inhabited this floor had entered the shrine room to do the 'ha ha' thing. Under DupliKatie's control, the shrine didn't consider them a threat. A suspicion formed.

"Okay, own up. How many brains did you eat?" I asked as I entered the room.

"Would you believe me if I said none?"

"No."

"Good, because that was a flagrant lie. It wasn't like you were using them."

I gave her a flick on the forehead. "And the rest of the corpses?"

"Made more blighted husks out of them. Their spawn rate is too slow, and I want my army back. I've only just hit fifty."

"That actually works without brains?"

"Yup. It's not as if zombies use them. Mostly. Obviously *I* do."

"Wait, does that mean they can fly?"

"Alas not. I'd hoped so, but once you die the physics breakage stops, so however hard they flap, nothing happens."

That doesn't change the fact that there's however-many winged zombies with my face shambling around, a thought that left me struggling not to burst into laughter.

"I can tell you don't really care," said the zombie, despite my struggles to keep a straight face.

"Hah. Maybe not. Actually, you can even have a few more, if you want. I've evolved disease nullification to disease immunity, and before I face that damn tree again, it would be helpful to train it a bit more."

"Of course," she said with a predatory smile. "I'd be *more* than happy to."

And so my grinding continued. In another sense of the word, this time; at least training disease resistance was considerably more fun than training heat resistance. To start with, anyway. DupliKatie only managed to get me another couple of levels via her usual intimate methods. She simply wasn't as leaky as the more damaged husks, leaving me needing more drastic measures to boost my immunity any higher.

"You want me to lick *that*?" I asked my zombie twin incredulously.

"Yup."

"And you deliberately found a zombie with an oozing sore by *there*, I assume?"

"No comment."

My zombie twin had brought in one of the zombies she'd made from my recent corpses, the burns around the mouth giving the face an even darker horror feel than the usual husks, made even worse by the neat

incision that ran around the full circumference of the top of the head. The wings were still mobile, if not functional, letting me see close up how they folded and flapped. It was more than enough information to rework my armour to accommodate them.

But first, doing my best not to gag, I licked up the black fluid oozing from a sore that crossed its breast.

Disease immunity advanced to level 34

My tongue burnt. My mouth and throat burnt. My stomach burnt. *Everything* burnt, and I felt it spreading. For the first time in a while, I'd had a dose of blight bigger than I could fight off. I coughed and spluttered as my throat dried. My lips cracked and began to ooze more of the black pus.

Disease immunity showed me the degradation in exquisite detail. While the seeds from the tree below—the guidance—co-opted nerves, muscles and blood vessels, the blight contaminated my *mana*. Apparently I had some sort of mana circulatory system, far too fine for sense mana to spot.

Sense mana advanced to level 9

Although watching the blight invade it helped.

"Whu..." I tried, my voice cracking as badly as my lips, sending me into a coughing fit and spraying the floor with suspiciously dark blood. Sheesh, things had got this bad in *minutes*? And there I was, wondering why the blight seemed weaker than the guidance. It was just that dupliKatie, being in such good condition, simply wasn't very infectious. At least in relative terms. I knew from skill feedback that merely being in the same room as her would have instantly doomed me without my resistance skills.

What even was that black stuff? I was developing sores of my own, leaking it from places other than my lips, and I could see that in each case the pus leaked from a location where a mana vein approached the surface. The fluids were corrupted mana? I reached out to touch one, only for the room to spin around me, the sudden dizziness dropping me to my knees. I made a raspy, choked noise that probably wanted to be a laugh, but by this point, it was getting rather hard to tell.

"Sorry, but I'm ending this now," came a voice from above, and the room started spinning rather more literally. The last thing I saw, looking up from ground level, was my own headless body toppling forward into a pool of black filth of its own making.

Disease immunity advanced to level 35

Back in the catacombs' shrine room, I shuddered. Were there *any* normal bacterial or viral infections here? The guidance was spread by plant seeds, and the blight was corrupted mana. I think whatever I picked up from eating the spider flesh had been viral, according to my skill evolution messages. Well, whatever. However unpleasant that had been, it had got me *two* levels of disease immunity, despite my already high level.

I skipped back to the throne room, ready for round two.

"You look awfully happy, considering I just beheaded you," commented my zombie twin.

"Two levels of disease immunity from that!" I exclaimed. "Let's go again!"

She sighed. "There's a reason we didn't rush resistance training using the blight, remember? First the dragon, and now this... You're starting to take far too many risks."

"It's fine. You can always behead me again before I zombiefy."

She sighed again, harder. "If I wasn't getting all the brains from this, I'd try to slap some sense into you, but as it is..."

She left the sentence dangling, but the zombie walking up to me and presenting an oozing arm said what

she hadn't. I licked up the black ooze, disease immunity once again informing me I was doomed before I'd even swallowed it.

Disease immunity advanced to level 36

Chapter 21: Forest fire

Disease immunity advanced to level 40

Another two doses of liquid blight, and my disease immunity capped. It seemed that despite the skill names, there was no quantity of levels that would actually render me completely immune to anything, but as long as I didn't drink great gulps of the black viscous fluid, the blight wouldn't harm me any more. Hopefully, the same would be true of the ostentatiously named guidance.

In her eternal quest to eat as many Katie brains as possible, my zombie twin had also obliged me further by whacking me repeatedly with my own femur, evolving my blunt damage tolerance to resistance and capping it at twenty. It proved surprisingly difficult to deal significant blunt damage to myself, aside from flying or running into walls, which wasn't particularly efficient, so I was glad of a training partner.

Evolution conditions met: Blunt damage tolerance ranks up to blunt damage resistance

Clubs, war-hammers, staves or even a fist, plenty of weapons work by subjecting their target to sudden, overwhelming momentum. This skill will allow you to absorb a portion of the impact.

Perhaps I should have had her throttle me too, and see what difference suffocation resistance would make at level twenty, but I'd already done enough skill grinding, and was fed up of all the Katie abuse. If I needed to use the hazmat suit strategy even with level forty disease immunity, I'd need to come back here for another go.

I marched down the stairs, and was happy to discover that despite their immunity to any physical attack, the slimes were ridiculously weak to fire. The briefest burst of flame was enough to kill the things, so I carefully worked my way along the corridor, toasting each one. Roasted slime turned out to be remarkably tasty, and not at all poisonous or diseased. Okay, so they were still pretty darn corrosive, but that was just another bonus.

Evolution conditions met: Corrosion nullification ranks up to corrosion immunity

Though not as common as poisons, some creatures or adventurers choose to use strong acids or alkalis, digestive enzymes, other corrosive agents or even rare decay magic. Just another danger of this world that any adventurer needs to be prepared for if they wish to survive. And somehow you have survived a powerful corrosive agent injected directly into your bloodstream, having your body wrecked by blight, being exposed to powerful decay magic for an extended period, and an acidic slime invading your lungs. You even ingested large amounts of a potent acid, which was not a sensible thing to do even if you did cook it first. For such feats, your nullification has been upgraded to immunity. This skill renders you immune to all but the strongest corrosive agents, and greatly improves your resistance to those that can still harm you.

Apparently, my marathon resistance training session still had a little more in the tank.

I stepped out of the slime-free and only slightly charred passage, and into the open cavern. No, not open. Open was the wrong word. It *had* been the correct word, but that was before someone had built stonking great rock walls around where my exit exited.

Not all the rock was stationary, either. Some of it was flying toward my face with a significant amount of speed.

I gave my wings a flap and sped toward the roof. I hadn't seen anything in this cavern that could fly, nor any anti-air defences. Even if there were any, the carnes multiformis hadn't known I could fly until ten

seconds ago, so they surely wouldn't have brought them. Sure enough, there were no further attacks.

So, who the hell had attacked me that time? It made no sense for them to have been going for a kill; they knew I'd respawn, so if they wanted me gone, they should have blocked the corridor completely, not built defensive walls around it. Not that I should say that out loud, in case I gave anyone any ideas. Presumably they were trying to knock me out again, but which village had it been? I couldn't imagine the second village was happy about me getting cosy with the first, but going straight to an attack seemed like an odd choice. I'd half expected some sort of bidding war, but I suppose they didn't really need my cooperation just to take some blood.

Letting curiosity get the better of me, I dived down from above. Or rather, my control being what it was, or wasn't, I simply stopped flapping my wings and dropped. Giving a large wing beat at wall height, I got a look at my attackers, and saw instances of *all four* genders. This was a combined assault force? What the hell? I'd only been gone a couple of days. Don't tell me they made peace in that time?!

I took back to the air as a barrage of crystal arrows and rock bullets were launched at me, easily evading them. I seemed to be correct that they had no experience fighting aerial opponents.

Ignoring them for now in favour of subjecting a certain tree to an unhealthy amount of dragon fire, I flew in the direction of the great cloud of miasma that my olfactory perception could pick up even from this distance. I could keep a blistering fast speed in the air, and if only I'd been able to maintain a straight line, I'd have been able to reach my target in minutes. As it was, I soon decided to land, managing the difficult manoeuvre without suffering a single broken bone.

Yes, that might have not been the case without my level twenty blunt damage resistance, but once again, I had the perfectly valid defence that humans were not built to fly!

There was no mask I could make that filtered the seeds in the air while still letting me breathe, so I marched into the pathogenic cloud trusting in my disease immunity to keep me safe. In case it didn't, I activated trigger respawn. I hadn't donned my armour in the first place, not fancying a repeat of the tentacle-infested clothing incident. I kept my nightie instead, which got replaced each respawn, and would hopefully prevent any vines travelling with me.

For now, my new and improved disease immunity was killing off the seeds before they could even germinate, but soon I once again found myself surrounded by drones. This time they didn't move with me, but stood barring my way.

"The wayward child returns," they all said, in perfect synchronisation. "Have you come to submit yourself to me?"

I responded by sweeping my new flamethrower left to right across the row of drones. There were... noises. Wet pops and loud crackling, both overshadowed by an almighty roar.

"No," I said, before bursting into a coughing fit. I'd pushed my flame breath a bit far there. Worse, the seeds were getting into my bloodstream through my internal burns. I'd need to hurry.

The row of carbonised corpses no longer posed an obstacle, so I hopped over them and continued on my way.

"More secrets. New powers. I will have them," came the voice again, and this time it was coming from all around. The closer I got, the greater the density of seeds in the air, and they were starting to overcome my resistance again, shoots of growth burrowing through my skin.

"Bad children will be punished," whispered the voice, and I felt the tendrils that had already invaded shock my nerves. I paused, expecting paralysis or something, but nothing happened.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," I muttered, resuming my sprint. Maybe it was stimulating my nerves that

transmitted pain, and my pain immunity negated it.

"The child still resists. An island, standing alone in my perfect garden."

"Yes, damn right I resist, you fucking rapist tree!"

The tree was in sight now, the branches already above my head. Which meant a bunch of drones were also over my head. I fired a brief burst of flame upwards when one tried to drop on me, resulting in another coughing fit. I probably only had one more shot, and I wanted to use it on the trunk.

More drones dropped around me, so I jumped up to the branch they'd just abandoned with a flap of my wings, running along it instead.

My feet sunk into the branch as a hole opened up in it, before it snapped shut again around them, leaving me trapped as far as my knees. What sort of ability was *that*? Then a dozen carnes multiformis limbs rose out of it, covered in a layer of bark, movements jerky and accompanied by creaking, and I finally realised just how literally the voice was being when it had said I would become a part of it. This wasn't a branch I was standing on, but former drones, interlinked and so overgrown with vines that I hadn't seen them for what they were.

Now that I'd noticed, I could see *that* fold in the bark that looked like the outline of a limb, and *those* bumps over there that could be fingers. Was the entire tree like this? Was it not a tree at all, just a collection of parasitised meat in the shape of one? Could it disassemble and turn itself into a drone army? And now that I'd noticed, proficient empath kicked in too, flooding me with thousands of minds worth of pleasure, letting me know just how good every victim of this plant was feeling, and how much they wanted to do nothing other than remain there, as a part of it.

What they were feeling was secondary to the fact that every single drone that made up the tree's structure was *still alive*.

What the heck sort of horror show was this?! How many thousands, *tens* of thousands of the overly limbed blobs would it take to make a structure of this size? And they were all kept alive? I mean, yes, they were all happy... More than happy; completely blissed out. But that was only because they had roots in their brain, or whatever their equivalent was, pumping them full of pleasure hormones and providing direct stimulation to the appropriate nerves.

I was so shocked I'd forgotten to struggle, and the limbs wrapped around me and dragged me further down into the branch, while vines grew up my legs.

"You will become a part of me, as will all life," said every drone that made up the branch, again in perfect synchronisation. That was exactly what it had said using my voice on our last meeting. I felt the heat rise again as the tree started messing with my hormones. To my amazement, it even started repairing the damage to my throat, covering the burns with its own plant-matter.

It... wouldn't be too bad to just relax here for a bit, would it? I'd already activated trigger respawn, so it wouldn't be long. I'd already been caught, so there was no way I was getting to the trunk now. I'd just try again next time. For my remaining time this respawn, I might as well enjoy myself. Disease immunity informed me of the tendrils interfacing themselves to my brain and spine, and as the coffin of flesh and bark rose over my head, I found myself dripping with anticipation.

"Good girl," came a thousand voices all around me, and my eyes snapped open.

In the middle of the pitch black cavern, for a few brief seconds, a fireball bloomed.

Chapter 22: Rage

"Fuck!" I yelled, back in the safety of the catacombs. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

A couple of patrolling zombies peered at me strangely, but I really couldn't be arsed right now. Even if my zombie twin was watching through their eyes, I needed to vent.

I don't surrender while I still have moves left to make! I don't *give in*! If it hadn't been for that final taunt by the bloody tree... I'd have just lay there, letting myself be absorbed. And worse, I'd have *enjoyed* it. I was enjoying it. No, it was even worse than that; I don't think it even *was* a taunt. It was legitimately pleased with me.

"Argggg!" I screamed.

I did *not* like being manipulated, and the tree was a master of doing so in a way that my skills could do nothing about. Disease immunity helped, but once it was overcome, how did I defend against something directly screwing with my brain? Was there such a skill as pleasure resistance, and would I want it if there was?

The scariest part was that some small part of me kept wondering why I was so furious. Why *not* give in, it asked. Why not let myself feel that pleasure all the time? Did I *want* to be angry, afraid and in pain, rather than living my life in bliss?

No, I damn well didn't. I wanted to burn the bloody tree to the ground, and that would give me far more pleasure than the fakery it was offering. At least now I knew why the limby blobs were so scared of the guidance. Maybe they'd had some breakthrough, using the information they'd got from me? I placed my hand against the statue and fast travelled.

The first village wasn't a great success, with the statue having been enclosed in a stone box. The second village was even worse, with the statue enclosed in a *poisoned* stone box. Apparently, I wasn't welcome at either, but given my reception the last time, that wasn't a great surprise. I'd have to take the long way around instead.

After a walk through the catacombs and a comforting hug from the zombie queen, I made my way down the stairs and along the passage, which ended in a stone wall.

Okay... Apparently, I was no longer welcome on the fourth floor at all. But *why*? Why would the carnes multiformis block me? Yes, I'd dabbled with both sides, but that shouldn't be any reason for them to unite against me.

I tapped against the wall as a theory formed. I could see why they were so scared of getting infested by the guidance, but how did they get infected? Surely all they needed to do was avoid the pods? But I'd already had capped disease nullification when I first set foot on the floor. The skill was always niggling away in the background, complaining of whatever weak diseases were around. There was disease everywhere, after all. There was a reason common sense would advise against, to pick a random example, licking cave walls. What if there was a background level of seeds in the air, so low that I'd ignored it?

'An island, standing alone in my perfect garden,' the tree had said. What if *everyone* was already infected? What if the pair of villages were kept around purely for reproductive purposes, to maintain the drone supply? Or at least, if not directly controlled, at least manipulated. Keeping them fighting each other, so that they wouldn't unite against the tree, but keeping things balanced so that neither village would ever win. That would explain the insane war. Was it the *tree* that was trying to keep me out?

Regardless of who or what was trying to keep me out, I needed to get back in. Since I was here already, I may as well try to get through this wall rather than the shrines. If that failed, I'd try the poisoned one in the hopes they wouldn't have guards on the outside, trusting to the poison.

I drew out my pickaxe and started mining. It was possible I could melt my way through, but the hour I would take to respawn afterwards would give them more than enough time to repair whatever damage I did. If I was to use my flame breath, I'd be better off doing so in one of the villages, in the last few

seconds before trigger respawn activated, so I could respawn there and then before my own flames killed me.

Mining advanced to level 5

The wall was thick enough that I couldn't simply punch through it, but wasn't so thick that I had trouble penetrating it with the pickaxe. Sense presence didn't pick up anything behind it, but that hadn't responded to anything on this floor. It only needed one more level to evolve. That would be worth doing at some point, but it was a bit late right now. Sense mana drew a blank too, but again, I hadn't caught anyone with magic items down here so far. It would tell me if someone tried to use magic to repair my hole, though.

Things remained silent as I enlarged the hole, and even when I stepped through. Neither traditional light nor olfactory perception picked up anything. Had they really underestimated me so badly that they'd left the wall unguarded? I took a few tentative steps, and in the absence of any volleys of arrows or flying rocks, made my way towards the first village. They were the ones I'd treated with most recently, so had less reason to be cross at me than the first, but given the unified assault force I'd seen last time, I doubted I'd be welcomed at either.

In fact, when I arrived at the village, it was deserted. Of all the options I was considering, that hadn't been one. Where had all the fleshy blobs gone?

And now I had a moral quandary. I was alone in a village that had at least some level of magitek, and while they'd given me one mana crystal, they'd implied they had more. Reaching out with sense mana, I could pick up a few items of interest in my vicinity, just waiting for me to go and loot them. On the other hand, I wasn't sure where the owners were. Chances were very good they hadn't left by their own choice, whether that was because they were being manipulated by the tree or something else had happened. Stealing their stuff while they were out fighting for their lives or freedom would be a rather dick move.

It wouldn't hurt to look around, though. Where was the closest signature?

Sense mana advanced to level 10

Bonus, but no evolution for it. I followed the trail of glowing mana into a building, the front door not merely unlocked but wide open, leading into what appeared to be someone's house. I hadn't considered what a bed for a ball of arms might look like, and the answer turned out to be a sort of hammock with carefully arranged holes for half their arms to dangle through. The chairs were bowl-shaped stools with three holes.

The signature was upstairs, which was reached not by stairs, but by a triangular arrangement of three ladders, each with offset rungs. I tracked it down to an obscenely smelly room that appeared to be where they applied their 'clothing'. It was a five-pointed star with a bulbous central section.

[Untranslatable]

Auto combinator, applicator and [untranslatable] for [untranslatable]. Can accept up to five [untranslatable].

Okay. That could stay where it was.

Alas, many of the signatures turned out to be similar things. Every house over a certain size had one of those applicators, which I assumed to be something to apply the scented clothing given the stench of the rooms I found them in. After the fifth one, I decided to ignore the structures that were obviously houses, and moved on to a different sort of place instead. It seemed to be some sort of barracks? Or maybe a hospital ward? There were rows of beds, each with equipment that my appraisal could offer no useful information about.

I ceased poking at one of them when I heard scratching. The deserted village had been completely silent,

so despite being quiet, it stood out immediately. I followed the sound out through a side door and into another room. I was used to strong smells in this settlement, but this room was *rank*. The reason why was obvious; ten icosahedral lumps of flesh, missing all twelve of their limbs. They surrounded a central pillar, from which tubes ran into the amputated monsters. Foul smelling liquids dribbled out of holes where some of the limbs had been. Seven of the ten had protrusions growing from their bodies, from which I could hear the quiet scratching. Babies.

Apparently, I'd found what happened to the kidnapped females from the second village. And no doubt the second village had a similar setup for their own kidnap victims. So, I'd been completely wrong. This was neither barracks nor a clinic. It was a baby factory.

It was enough to make me feel sick. This was, in a way, even worse than the centipedes' breeding chamber; all ten of the victims were alive. No doubt those tubes were there to feed them. How long had they been stuck here? What a hellish existence, but there was nothing at all I could do for them short of a quick death. Heck, I wanted to burn the whole *building*. If it wasn't for the backlash from my flame breath, I would have.

They hadn't reacted to me entering, and proficient empath shared nothing but despair. Given what I'd seen so far, chances were good that any sense organs they had were on their limbs. They were completely blind. Or suffering anosmia, or whatever the correct term would be for these things. I walked right up to them, and still nothing. I plunged my spear into an important-looking organ, visible through their transparent skin. Proficient empath shared the pure relief she felt for the last few seconds before she lost consciousness, bleeding out and dying a minute later.

Proficient stealth advanced to level 11

That just added another level of wrongness to the whole experience... Nevertheless, I repeated my attack on the other nine, every single one of them glad for their release.

Proficient stealth advanced to level 12

So much for my moral quandary about stealing from the deserted village. I was looting this place for every penny it was worth.

The next building I tried was an armoury. Rows upon rows of identical spears lined one wall, but the length and gentle curve made them unsuitable for me. Appraisal didn't rate them any higher than my fox-kin spear, anyway. The bows were similar; impossible to operate without at least four hands. I couldn't find anything I could use for myself, and none of the materials used were better than what I had. There wasn't a single magical object in the building. Nor was there any armour. That matched with what I'd seen of their fighters.

I explored more buildings, few of which I could work out the purpose of. Appraisal was no use, reporting almost everything as [untranslatable]. One of them seemed to be some sort of bathhouse, despite the houses I'd explored already having generous bathrooms. Another was obviously something to do with the mages, given that mana sense showed it gathering and concentrating mana into one of the central rooms, and it was there I found a few more mana crystals, although I couldn't use them for levelling without finding a fresh supply of damaged shrines. It was a shame the blobs hadn't destroyed their own on their way out. I also found my stolen anti-transportation bracelet, which I'd almost forgotten about.

That just left one more structure that took up a full side of the plaza the statue was situated in; a three-sided pyramid. The door to this one was closed, but not locked, so I pushed it open, only to be greeted by a burst of guidance. So, the tree really had been involved in the villages. The inside of the structure was a single room, lightly terraced seating along all three sides, pointing towards the centre. The central triangle was unfloored, with vines running about it, congregating at a central spike on which grew one of the pods.

"Are you one of the talkative ones?" I asked it, but got no response. Guess it wasn't.

There wasn't very much in the way of seating. From the appearance of the place, it was some sort of council or debating chamber. So the village's rulers, at the least, were puppets.

That was the village explored and a rather disappointing amount of loot claimed. I might as well smash the wall around the shrine while I was here, then I'd take a look at the other village. After that... I was still pissed at the tree, but I didn't want to get close to it if it was just going to mind-fuck me again. I'd finish exploring the cavern, then start destroying the vines and mana collectors.

I turned around to leave the chamber, bringing me face to... limb-mouth-thing with a group of three *carnes multiformis*.

"Suffer," came the tree's whispered voice from behind me, as sense mana picked up a burst of *something* from all three of the monsters.

Chapter 23: Encounter

A bright white flash surrounded me, and it took a moment to remember I was wearing my necklace of shielding. I really needed to keep better track of my magical items. Had it been a full day since I'd looted it? I suppose that I'd left it on for enough of my recent deaths that a day must have passed for it, even if not for me.

I flamethrowered the three before they had a chance to react to their failed surprise attack, then turned back to the pod.

"So, you were just playing silent until your reinforcements arrived?"

"You will *suffer*. I shall hear your screams. Your cries of anguish. You will come to regret your choice, but there will be no relief. No pleasure. No bliss. For you, only an eternity of pain."

"Well, you've sure changed your tone. Did I hurt your poor widdle feelings?"

The pod didn't answer. While I'd like to goad that it shouldn't be threatening me *after* I'd effortlessly defeated its ambush attempt, the fact was that I'd lucked out. They'd caught me by surprise, and if not for my necklace, they'd have got me. I didn't even know what with. It hadn't been the usual earth magic, whatever it was.

I'd been careless, dropping my vigilance after not seeing any signs of life for so long while exploring the village, but I still had sense mana and sense presence going, and my three-sixty degree olfactory perception. They were too weak for sense presence. Sense mana hadn't picked them up until moments before their spell, so either they masked it or it had zero casting time, and they were wearing camouflaged scent, but rather than rock, it was the smell of the settlement. Sense danger hadn't reacted either, but perhaps that was because I wasn't actually in danger, thanks to the shield. It had been a perfect surprise assault, spoilt only by chance when I turned around. Without that, the shield would still have protected me from the first attack, but they may have got a second shot in before I reacted.

Now it would take another full day to recharge. If there were surprise attacks coming, should I retreat until it was available again? Or at least activate trigger respawn? An hour wouldn't be nearly enough to search the second village. I'd just have to keep a more careful watch.

I gave the pod the briefest burst of flame I could manage, avoiding causing myself an injury, then flew to the second village, taking the opportunity to practise travelling in the direction I actually wanted to take. It probably would have been quicker to walk, but I was slowly getting the hang of it. I didn't crash once!

The second village was every bit as deserted as the first, and the interior much the same. My first visit was to their breeding chamber, where I put the victims out of their misery.

Proficient stealth advanced to level 13

I still felt a bit bad about the fact I was getting skill levels from doing so. Would I ever hit a dungeon floor that wasn't so badly messed up? Either one that only contained unintelligent monsters, or a settlement like the fox-kin's but with less paranoia, zealotry and insanity.

I found a few more mana crystals, giving me enough of a stockpile to get aberrant monster tamer to level ten, should I find enough repair-the-shrine side quests. They had the same council chamber, too, once more with a pod growing in the middle. I torched it without letting it speak, then stepped back outside.

Sense presence advanced to level 10

Evolution conditions met: Sense presence ranks up to perceive presence

All beings possess mana, and even an unskilled child would be able to notice the attention of a sufficiently powerful being from the mana they unconsciously emit. Of course, should an unskilled child ever attract attention from such a powerful being, they had best pray it is not hostile, because neither running nor fighting would be an option. You have felt the presence of a variety of powerful creatures, from the powerful draco rubrum to the variable vulpes sagax and the more lowly daemonium volucer, the variety of experiences earning you this upgrade from sense to perception. This skill heightens your awareness of this leaking mana, allowing you to detect it even when you aren't the focus of attention, and to detect it from monsters with a lower mana density, as well as giving some indication of the type of creature you are detecting.

I would have liked to take the time to wonder what a daemonium volucer was, but I didn't get the chance, because the presence I'd picked up was approaching at a ridiculous speed from directly above me. I dived back into the council chamber, on the basis that having a roof over my head would be advisable. A blur of red dropped in front of the door, then halted a metre above the floor. I had a brief glimpse of an imp-like creature, humanoid but less than half a metre tall. It had red skin and two black eyes, red stubby wings and a pair of even stubbier horns. I saw no weapons, but it was well endowed in the claw department. It was also wrapped in vines. I didn't get a chance to use appraisal before it blurred again, this time heading towards me.

I summoned my shield into its path and it collided with a clang, sending me a few steps backward.

Proficient blocker advanced to level 20

Presumably the imp was the daemonium volucer in question. My attacker had bounced off, so I took the opportunity to pull my sword and armour from item box, throwing my torch to the floor so I could keep some light. It was certainly at the weaker end of things I could detect, but its speed was insane. I could barely track it with my eyes. Despite it being obviously vined, right now I needed the protection from my armour, and couldn't afford to worry about it getting seeds caught in it again. Worst case, I was sure I could manage to flame breath myself.

The imp blurred again, heading for my chest, so I swung my sword in its path. It switched direction with an ease that suggested conservation of momentum was more of a guideline than a rule, passing above my sword and raking its claws across my face. It cut through the silk, but only made some light scratches into my skin, the combination of silk armour, toughened skin and resistance skill preventing much damage. Poison immunity informed me its claws were poisoned, and disease immunity informed me the guidance was mixed in too, but both were neutralised without issue.

We repeated a few similar exchanges, with it dodging my sword strikes and even my attempts at blocking with my shield. I tried a few bursts of flame breath, but it effortlessly rolled out of the way. I probably could have hit it with a full strength burst, but that would take me out, too. But maybe a double knockout was the best I could hope for; even if it was only managing to scratch me each time, the scratches were adding up. I couldn't keep the fight up forever.

Perhaps I could repeat my first trick. I stored my sword and shield, acting as if I was going to rely fully on my flame. The imp blurred again, making another run at my torso. Doing my best to judge how long it took an item to be summoned from my item box, I waited until the last possible moment, then summoned my sword into its path.

Despite my surprise move, it still tried to dodge but didn't veer far enough off course. With a pair of wet thuds, I was knocked back another few steps as the two imp halves impacted me.

Sword proficiency advanced to level 19

Now, what the heck was I just attacked by?

daemonium volucer

These denizens of the abyss may rank among the bottom of the food chain, but their impressive speed is normally sufficient to escape the clutches of stronger predators. They are unintelligent and their only weapons are their claws, coated in a venom that causes a powerful burning sensation.

That was the *bottom* of the food chain? If that's the abyss' version of the munchers from the first floor, then I hope I'm not ever going to be visiting. But how did a demon get up here? Did the limby blobs summon it? Did the *tree* summon it? Was that its counter to my piss-poor flight? To attack me with something that was actually *good* at flying?

The corpse didn't have any good materials. I took the claws regardless, because I had a silly big item box now and might as well fill it, but the rest didn't offer anything and was contaminated by the parasitic vines. I gave it another quick dose of flame and let it burn.

That was the second village explored, and another rather concerning attack dealt with. I broke down the wall around the shrine, then set off to explore the rest of the cavern. Given the tree was now making outright assaults on me, it was time I reciprocated, so I burnt the mana collecting bowls and seed-spreading pods as I went, as well as slashing the occasional thick clump of vines. Despite searching the whole place, I didn't find anything of interest, or any trace at all of where the blobs had gone. Maybe the tree had used them to repair the damage I'd done to it last time? Or was using them to build a new defensive perimeter around itself.

I was trying to be methodical about things this time, so instead of rushing straight back in, I decided to make a few loops around it, at ever decreasing distance, destroying every vine and trace of plant I could find. They seemed to be supplying the central tree with mana, so cutting off its supply could only help me, as long as it couldn't grow back the damage faster than I could burn it. It was slow going, given how long I had to wait between each flame burst to avoid cooking myself, and I only managed half of my first loop before the tree responded.

Perceive presence pinged first, and I was happy to discover I could now tell the species of what I detected. Two more of the imps and one unknown creature.

Mind magic nullification pinged second, shortly before my face hit the floor.

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 23

What the heck? I woke up back at the catacombs with a pounding headache. It was fading quickly, but any sort of headache making it past my pain immunity was impressive. I had no clear memories of what had happened, either. One moment I was burning vines, there had been some sort of mental attack, then nothing. And mental *attack* was a good description. I was fairly sure nothing had tried to brainwash me, or read my memories, or control me in any way. It had been a simple onslaught; an attempt to crush my mind with pure force.

How had I got back here? Had I activated trigger respawn by instinct before I was knocked out? Had

something killed me later? I still had all of my magic items on me, so my corpse hadn't been looted. Maybe the tree just didn't see the value of magic items? I hadn't seen the carnes multiformis with anything like enchanted rings, or even weapons, so maybe it didn't know what they were.

My headache declined to a mild tingling, so it was about time I stood up. Which made the fact that I *couldn't* rather alarming. My body still responded, but my armour was a rigid cage. I couldn't even bend my neck to look at it, but given that I couldn't store it, I was willing to guess I'd been vined again, and that this time they'd had the full hour to grow. I couldn't even wiggle my fingers!

Did this count as a new bondage situation, or was it a duplicate of my last encounter with tentacle armour?

There were no zombies around, and shouting didn't attract any, so I couldn't get them to try to free me. It did attract some other attention, though.

"Not just your body, but your mind is rebuilt too. Secrets upon secrets. I will erase them."

"Thought you wanted to steal them?" I muttered, wondering how to get out of this. I couldn't flame myself if I couldn't move my neck. What if I kept my mouth closed? I'd probably just burn through it. I could drop a lump of centipede shell on me? That should contain my flame breath enough to free my head, and I could do the rest next respawn? But it would have an hour to grow back while I was dead. Trying to time trigger respawn so that I melted the vines before my respawn but didn't die would be tough. Forget about fire; I needed *weedkiller*. Perhaps I could use flame breath while inhaling rather than exhaling?

One way to find out.

Chapter 24: Engagement

I poked at a dinner-plate sized fragment of chitin with my spear in an attempt to dislodge it from where it had become embedded in the ceiling. Unlike the walls, it turned out not to be completely indestructible, and while the shrine's autocleaning functionality had tidied up most of the resulting mess of the Katie bomb, the fractured chitin chunks and some of the larger remaining pieces of charred flesh remained.

My zombie twin would no doubt lament the loss of the brain, but it had alas been far too close to ground zero, and no trace was left.

That wasn't the way I'd been expecting to learn more about the behaviour of how the shrine rooms cleaned themselves, with the cut-off point being a lump of flesh around fist sized, but I'd take it. At least the shrine hadn't been damaged in the explosion. Or viewed another way; drat, the shrine hadn't been damaged in the explosion. Now I couldn't get a new side quest to repair it.

I'd need to make new armour *again*. That last set had a life span not much longer than my own. Annoying, but not much I could do about it. Not that armour would be any use against whatever had attacked me last time. Despite exploring the entire cavern and finding nothing but the carnes multiformis and the tree, I'd been attacked first by an imp, and then by a group of imps and something else with mind magic powers. The tree had found a new army to attack me with, and I had no idea where it was coming from, or what else might come out. I was clearly outclassed.

Perhaps it was time for the nuclear option; blight the whole damn floor.

I returned to the throne room, not seeing a single zombie on the way. That was odd; as my zombie twin was fond of complaining, they respawned very slowly, but they *did* respawn. There were normally some hanging around the shrine room, if only for my twin to point and laugh at me by proxy. There were usually a few aimlessly wandering the catacombs, too. Where had they all gone? Feeling slightly concerned about my twin, I sped up. I sped up more when perceive presence picked up tens of signatures

ahead of me.

The throne room was a war zone.

The *carnes multiformis* were pouring up the staircase and out into the room, where dozens of zombies were engaging them, desperately trying to take them out at a speed faster than they were coming in. Apparently my skill evolution now let me sense them. I saw my zombie twin flickering from group to group, leaving fresh corpses wherever she went, but there was only one of her, and the lesser blighted husks had nowhere near her power.

At least the corpses she made didn't remain corpses for long, twitching and climbing back to their arm-feet within minutes. At this point, most of the zombies were actually the many-limbed monsters, rather than fox-kin or my own corpses. They weren't moving right though, and seemed to be fighting against the vines that infested them.

Mindless drones vs mindless zombies. There was probably a half-decent B-movie plot in there somewhere.

"Katie!" yelled my twin. "Flamethrower the corridor! Now! I can't hold them much longer!"

Even if I killed off job lots of them, with the amount pouring up, I doubted it would buy much time. Presumably she had something else in mind, like sealing the wall. I did as she asked, sprinting for the staircase, but the drones reacted, moving as one to block me. Normally, turning their backs on their current opponents would have been an immediately fatal mistake, but the symmetrical monsters didn't *have* backs. They could defend equally well, no matter which way they were moving.

My zombie twin moved in, attempting to clear me a path. Her sword skills were still far beyond my own, but even she couldn't take out a half dozen monsters in a few seconds. She could tie them down, though, and that was all I needed. This room had a high ceiling, and I had wings.

Even if I couldn't fly perfectly, I could use them to get a bit more height in and make a world-record long jump. I flew over the top of the drones, landing in front of the corridor, and let loose my flames.

I woke back up in the shrine room and immediately sprinted back to the throne room. Zombies were busy eating the leftover mess, while my twin was stood where the passage downstairs used to be, one ear held against the wall.

"They're waiting outside," she said when she saw me. "I can't reopen the passage. It only works when no-one is looking."

"They have no eyes though," I pointed out. "They *can't* look."

"Whatever they do instead, then. My point still stands. Regardless, if they take out the shrines too, you're going to get trapped up here. You need to go and defend them right now. Or very soon. First, you can explain what the hell is going on. The abridged version, please."

"I exploded a bit of the tree, and that seems to have convinced it I'm a threat. Now it's trying to defend itself against me, rather than turn me into one of its drones. It knew I was coming from up here, so maybe it was launching an invasion in the hopes of stopping my respawns."

About half of the zombies in the room were now *carnes multiformis*, but their vines looked dessicated, shrivelled and cracked. Had the blight infected them? They were obviously connected to the tree, despite not being physically attached, given that it could perceive and talk through them. How did the connection work? Was it magic? If so, had the blight spread through it, given that it infected mana?

Perceive presence picked up something ascending the staircase. The same something that had crushed my mind before. Already I was glad of the upgrade that let me identify species.

"Run!" I yelled. "Get away from the wall! There's something coming up with mind magic!"

With a look of alarm, my zombie twin bolted from the room. I followed her back to the shrine room, where I leant against a wall, panting. She, annoyingly, was fine. One advantage of not needing to breathe. If I maxed suffocation resistance, would that mean I could exercise forever without getting out of breath?

"How did you know?" she asked, now that we'd taken a safe distance.

"I evolved sense presence. I can feel out what things are now, and whatever was coming up the stairs was the thing responsible for my last death. It knocked me out despite my mind magic nullification from a considerable distance, without giving me a chance to react."

My zombie twin clicked her tongue in annoyance. "I'm not even certain *I'm* safe here. We already know spatial magic can bypass the walls, and if a mind mage has come out of nowhere, what's to say others can't too?"

"Won't these things fall to the blight before getting too far? For that matter, isn't there blight on the outside of that wall? If the things are massed outside, shouldn't it have infected them?"

"It's not infallible. You aren't the only one who we've seen walking around in it. But yes, it may be spreading downstairs already. If it is, this crown doesn't let me see it."

"One way to find out..."

I activated trigger respawn, tapped the statue and invoked fast travel, jumping down to the first village. It was no longer unoccupied, with a neat ring of... *things* standing in a circle some distance from the shrine. There were carnes multiformis in there, but there were also daemonium volucer and a half dozen other species I didn't recognise. Perceive presence informed me of the existence of three of the mind magic creatures, which I could now see as floating brains, a metre across, hovering in the air.

daemonium cerebrum

These denizens of the abyss have no strength of their own, blind, deaf and only able to float at a sedate pace, but their impressive mental abilities permit them to control far stronger monsters to act as their senses, hands and feet. They will always be accompanied by several mind-slaves, but they tend to value utility over fighting strength; their mind magic is typically the only defence they require.

In a spot of irony, the brains were wrapped in vines. The slavers had become the slaves.

A five metre tall, red-skinned humanoid monster stood at a distance, out of my appraisal range, completely naked, aside from his puppet-string vines, and *very* definitely male. He was unarmed and unarmoured, and had no visible claws, fangs or other inbuilt weaponry, but perceive presence was telling me he was spider queen level. Not something I wanted to fight.

None of the other new species were even vaguely humanoid. There were several daemonium vermis, which looked like extra long, lightly segmented slugs, if slugs had discovered teeth and decided to run with the idea, but hadn't realised they were supposed to live in mouths. Appraisal told me they were more low-level denizens that survived by scavenging. There was a tentacle monster, daemonium crinis, which was a conical pillar of pulsating flesh with about twenty tentacles sticking out seemingly at random. There was the most beautiful female face I'd ever seen, with perfect, blemish-free pink skin, a petite nose and bright blue eyes. Alas, rather than being attached to an equally perfect body, it was set into a red, fleshy disk, from which six black, bat-like wings sprouted at the edges. Appraisal called that one daemonium siren, and suggested that listening to its voice would be a terminally bad idea.

The only thing all the creatures had in common was the way they were staring at me, but not making any other move. For now, was I protected by the shrine's barrier? Wasn't it supposed to shield the entire village? No, probably not; I'd been told the barrier was the only reason the guidance didn't affect the

settlements, but it had already been inside. The barrier must only cover a small area. The villages were lost before I'd ever arrived.

"Umm... Hello?" I tried, given that none of them had moved or attempted to attack me in any way. From the sadistic spiders, I knew they should be able to use ranged attacks through the barrier, but none of the demons were even trying. "This is sort of creepy..." I added, when I didn't get any response.

What were they waiting for? Were those floating brains already inside my head? Were they waiting for me to make the first move? I couldn't burn the whole circle of monsters, and my combat skills had barely been enough to deal with one imp, while here I had a full menagerie.

"You allied yourself with the blight," came an unprompted voice after another ten seconds of silence.

"The blight *wears your face*," came a second, from the opposite direction. This was a change from the synchronised speaking it normally did.

"The blight cannot have it!" exclaimed a third voice, louder and angry.

"All life in this dungeon is *mine*. Mine to take. To control. To reward or torment. MINE!"

This thing saw the blight as *competition*? But I wouldn't say I allied myself with it, as such. It's just that the queen of the blight happened to be a good friend of mine.

Apparently done with the waiting, one of the giant brains made a move. Not an outright assault this time, but something more careful. I was angry, and I was confident. Between my flames and sword skills, I knew I could rush out there and fight. I could kill them all.

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 24

I stayed right where I was. The manipulation felt too similar to a slave collar for me to be fooled by it.

A second brain made a move. I couldn't fight all these foes, but I didn't need to. My draconic wings would carry me away from here at a speed none of them could match. All I needed was to leap upwards, dive towards the tree, and I could flame it before any of them caught me.

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 25

Nope, not falling for that one, either. The imps were faster than me and had the added advantage of actually knowing how to fly. This was good resistance training, so I turned towards the third brain and waited to see what it had in store.

The demons were angry. For centuries, they had been held back from leaving the abyss, the path to the upper layers too well guarded. They pushed and pushed, to no avail. Then things had changed; the guardian began to push back. It spread its roots down into the abyss, feeding off the burning mana that pervaded it. The guardian changed, its bark burning and charring as it took in the fiery mana of the abyss. Its vines started *infecting* the demons, rather than merely consuming them. The guardian spread a pestilence that took the minds of those it touched.

The king of the abyss fought back, delaying the guardian while a defensive wall was constructed. The progress of the guardian stalled, and for a time, things reached a stalemate. Then the new infected had come. Strange creatures of flesh and limbs, wielding powerful magic of earth. They built bridges and tore down the walls, rapidly overrunning the defences. The guardian pushed forward once more, taking ever more mana and turning demons into its puppets. The guardian had never given up; it was simply biding its time as it built up new forces.

I blinked. That one wasn't an attempt to get me to leave the safety of the barrier, or do something stupid. Had brain number three just shared a new chunk of backstory with me? So that was where all the demons were coming from? The abyss that the fox-kin kept swearing by was a real place, only one floor down

from here? And the tree had used the *carnes multiformis* to launch a raid down there, tear down their defences and start puppeting a new set of drones. Interesting information, for sure, but I wasn't sure how it helped me. From the sounds of it, the guardian had changed after absorbing mana from the abyss. What if I cut it off? Severed all the vines around the staircase?

Of course, as with the other backstories in this place, I had no idea how much of the vision was actually grounded in reality. Basing future strategy on it was risky.

The third brain started squirming and pulsating, before a thousand vines burst through the surface. Bright red blood sprayed from the holes as the brain fell from the air, hitting the ground with a wet squelch. Bad children will be punished, the tree had said. Apparently, that didn't apply only to me.

I couldn't win this. How could I fight an enemy that controlled an entire army of monsters? Many of these demons could beat me one on one, and I was surrounded by an entire horde. I should fast travel back upstairs, as much as it galled to give in. Or I could surrender and beg forgiveness. Hope that if I helped it to the best of my ability, it wouldn't punish me too badly for my earlier defiance. Maybe I could eventually earn back some of the pleasure it had teased me with, that I had so ungratefully cast aside?

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 26

"Have I ever mentioned how much I hate having my mind messed with?" I asked, before flaming the surviving pair of brains.

Chapter 25: Old Friends

Sense danger advanced to level 6

I ducked an attack from behind, a volley of spines fired from the twin tails of a six-legged daemonium spina, then brought out a pair of shields to defend against another pair of volleys from the sides. That left me unable to do anything about a fourth attack from the front, and a half dozen needles, thirty centimetres long and a few millimetres wide, pierced into my torso. My health didn't drop by much, but that would soon change given that both lungs had been hit.

The decision not to wear armour had been a considered one. I didn't want to risk bringing any seeds into the catacombs, so from now on it was nighties only.

Making the most of the time I had left, I dragged what air I could into my leaking lungs and flamed the throng before me.

"So, how did it go?" asked my zombie twin, the second I woke back up in the catacombs.

"Not great," I answered, before filling her in on the events. I'd expected her to make a snide remark about how useful her mind magic resistance training had been, but she kept a serious face throughout. Guess she didn't consider this something to treat jovially.

"So, if we do beat the tree, we face a demonic invasion. Turning it back to normal sounds like the best outcome, but remember that from what the demon told you, it sent its roots into the abyss *before* it was corrupted. Maybe it didn't know what would happen, but it might have been a megalomaniacal dick to start with."

As much as I hated to admit it, the last set of thoughts the floating brains had shoved into my head weren't entirely incorrect. I couldn't fight a demon army. The only powerful attack I had killed me with the backlash, and each time I died, the tree would gain another hour to conscript new demonic forces. I couldn't imagine winning any sort of war of attrition.

"I'm going back upstairs for a bit," I said. "I need to learn to fly properly. I should have done so ages ago. And then... Maybe I throw a bottle of black blighted pus at the tree, or burn the vines that lead to the abyss. Something. But I can't do a thing if I can't even reach it, and those imps are *fast*."

My zombie twin just sighed and waved me off. I'd need to spend more time with her once the fourth floor was sorted, to help her recover from the stress.

I spent hours in the wolves' cavern, working until I could reliably fly in the direction I wanted and manoeuvre with a little more grace than a charging bull. I wasn't going to be doing any aerial obstacle courses, but I would be able to point myself at the tree and blast my way there faster than my feet would take me.

Hovering over the cliff edge, I laughed at my old issues getting down it and how I'd wished for a skill that granted wings. Would I one day look back at my parasitic tree problems in the same way? When I'd picked up some sort of demon-cleansing purification skill that would have made the whole thing completely trivial?

Feeling that I could spend at least a few minutes unwinding from the constant fighting and training, I dived down the cliff to the larger caverns below, flying above the treeline. There was far less light down there now, but no patches of the unnatural darkness cast by the blight. Scars showed where crystal trees had previously grown. The fox-kin seemed to have taken a scorched earth policy, and with the blight gone, it had obviously worked.

I came across one of the seven-finned, blue, blimp-like monsters, this one a mere baby only five metres in length, and took a seat on its soft, bouncy surface. They'd always flown too high up for me to appraise, but now I finally had a chance to see what they were.

vesica pasco

These harmless, unintelligent creatures live out their lives high up in the air, grazing on the ambient mana. They are not limited by lifespan, but will continue to grow for their entire existence, until they reach a point at which the ambient mana can no longer sustain them and starve to death.

Well, that was a bit sad. I didn't see the giant one around anymore. Maybe the loss of so many crystal trees from the area, which had previously been discharging mana into the air, had lowered the ambient density.

I stood up to fly away, only for something to land on my head and yank me back down onto my back. Whatever I'd been hit with draped down over the rest of me, strong, sticky and invisible, gluing me to the top of the monster blimp. A couple of seconds of struggling was enough to identify it as a web. The spider queen's web, to be precise. And yup, sure enough, the whole blimp-like creature suddenly started moving sideways, in quick jerking motions, and before long a powerful presence came into range of my skill.

"I've caught myself a little fly," came the voice of the spider queen, as she hopped aboard my blimp. "A fly that has learnt to fly."

"Hello?" I tried.

"Hello indeed. Now, I know the two of us had no ongoing deal, but you do have to admit that after bringing me down here to feed on the *vulpes sagax*, decimating their whole settlement was in rather poor spirit."

"It wasn't on purpose!"

"No, of course not," the spider deadpanned. "You deliberately infected your captor with blight and expected it to what, exactly? Cause a sudden outbreak of sniffles?"

"Well, I expected it to... Hey, wait. How do *you* know that?"

"Because I *asked*, you foolish fly. Feeding where there are so few left would immediately attract attention I couldn't handle. Rather, I traded them my protection. The faster they repopulate the cavern, the better

for me. Not that they believe they'll get the chance."

"Why? What's happening now?"

"You, you foolish fly. You and your Goddess-given quest. They seem to believe that once you complete it, they'll all cease to exist."

I sighed as I stopped struggling against the web and flopped backward into the comfy and squidgy monster I was pinned to. So, my guess about the arch-mage's motivations had been correct then. He had nothing against me personally, at least until I blighted them all, but had only been trying to memory wipe me to make me forget about my quest, making sure I'd never complete it. He'd simply been trying to protect his people.

"This world is fucked up," I lamented. "What sort of personality does the Goddess have, to build a place like this?"

Or worse, what sort of imagination did *I* have if this was all plucked out of my own head? It couldn't have been, surely?

"An interesting question, but not one that weighs heavily on my own mind. I did not cast my nets for a philosophical discussion. I cast them to catch my dinner."

"I don't have time to respawn right now. If you want more kidneys, wait until after I've done something about the megalomaniac tree that's trying to assimilate all life, and the possible demonic invasion from the abyss."

"Oh my, the little fly faces such *large* problems, while little old me faces only insignificant things, like wondering where my next meal is coming from."

"Yes, yes. You can cut the sarcasm. I've got a bunch of those panther things from your jungle upstairs if you want them."

"No thanks. I'd rather eat you."

Damn... Stupid me for thinking I was safe in the air. I'd guessed she wouldn't be happy to meet me, and had deliberately avoided her copse, but how was I to know she had moved and could fire her webs from outside of my presence detection range?! That was completely unfair. Anyway, when the centipede's attention was on me, I could feel it from the other side of the floor. How hadn't I felt her? Could she mask it?

At least now I had a means of fighting back. The queen effortlessly lifted my legs and started releasing silk bindings wider than she was, rapidly wrapping me from the bottom up. I waited until she was standing on top of my tummy and I had a clear shot at her without risking hitting myself, and flamed her.

She dodged, but wasn't quite fast enough, and I struck her legs down one side. She darted away, and a sudden stabbing pain in my neck accompanied my body falling limp.

Poison immunity advanced to level 33

My poison resistance had evolved since our last training session. The feedback told me that her kiss of paralysis would last for only half an hour, and I still had some amount of movement. Enough to use my fire breath, but not enough to aim.

"Just how many new tricks has the little fly learnt," muttered the queen, and I could see her out the corner of my eye shaking her burnt legs. "Wings, fire breath, toughened skin, and your ability to resist my kiss has grown stronger again."

"Belll..." I slurred, attempting to make intelligible noises through the paralysis. It didn't work too well.

"But not strong enough, I see. A pity, for I would not have been averse to continuing our conversation while I dined."

I apparently hadn't caused the queen any serious injury, and she resumed gift-wrapping her prize. Should I self-detonate again, just to be vindictive? Or activate trigger respawn and hope for more resistance levels before it fired? So much for only spending ten minutes flying around the lower cavern; now I was going to waste another hour.

I activated trigger respawn and left the spider queen to it. Levels were levels, after all, and it was going to cost me an hour either way. Besides, I still had a bit of a thing for being cocooned. Not that I'd admit it to anyone other than my zombie twin, who already knew. Some relaxation before getting back to the megalomaniacal tree wouldn't hurt. I still had to maintain the look of the thing, though, so I gave the queen my best glare as she wrapped my head.

I felt the bumping and scraping as she effortlessly dragged me off somewhere, before she hoisted me into the air, leaving me upside-down. "Mmpff," I complained, to no avail. Sense presence could pick up a few dozen signatures nearby. Fox-kin?

"What in the abyss are you doing?!" yelled a male fox-kin voice, confirming my guess. She really had made some sort of deal with them. How in the hells could she get on with them after *eating* them, when I couldn't? Life was so unfair...

"Calm down, little vulpes," answered the spider. Why was I the only one she called a fly? "This isn't one of you."

"What is it then? I haven't seen any monsters that shape in the cavern."

I felt movement around my head, followed by a burst of light as the silk bands around my face were torn off. There was a cross looking fox-kin in front of me, and I was sure I'd seen his face before. One of the mages? What his name was, I had no idea. Then he saw my face, and his expression darkened from merely cross to utter hatred.

"Her," he muttered under his breath. "Fine. I may have promised not to go after her, but if she turns up here... No-one could blame me." He continued to glare for a few seconds before speaking back up more loudly. "Whatever. I'll be back in a moment. Just keep her uncomfortable."

"You make many enemies, little fly," commented the spider.

"They... started... it..." I forced out, the paralysis having worn off to the point I could form words again, with enough effort.

"Perhaps. But the little vulpes did raise a valid point. You seem far too relaxed there, and at our last meeting, keeping you paralysed meant that I missed out on your beautiful screams."

Another prick on my neck accompanied a burning sensation flooding my body, but with my pain and poison immunities, I didn't even whimper.

Poison immunity advanced to level 34

Pain immunity advanced to level 33

"Was... that... supposed... to... hurt...?" I goaded.

"Yes, but alas, our previous session appears to have been too effective. Never mind. I shall wait to see what your vulpes friend has in store."

He returned minutes later, holding a choker. My first thought was that I'd get to add yet another slave collar to my collection, but on closer inspection, its appearance was subtly different. A little thicker, with a jewel set in the front.

Cursed choker of petrification

This magical item petrifies the wearer. This item is cursed and is irremovable once worn.

"I think I've got a handle on your abilities," said the fox-kin with an evil grin. His plan was already obvious without saying anything more, but alas, he didn't know I'd already appraised it, and he was wearing a full-blown I'm-about-to-start-monologuing smirk. He obviously wasn't going to be able to resist the urge to explain how clever he was. "You can generate a new body for yourself at will, but it takes an hour to form. Or if you die on your own, you resurrect automatically one hour later. In either case, once your new body is ready, your equipment transfers to it. So, if you happen to be wearing a bit of equipment that kills you... Well... Let's just say you aren't going to have a good time."

Yeah... Screw that. My zombie twin could just remove it, and maybe it would be good for more resistance levels, but I couldn't justify the lost time, and there was always a risk the catacombs would have been overrun in my absence, leaving me on my own. He wasn't directly in front of me and I couldn't move my head, so I couldn't flame him. I'd need to self destruct. I breathed out and prepared to take a deep breath in, only for a glob of silk to smack me in the face, blocking my airways.

"You caught me once with that trick, little fly, but I'm hardly going to fall for it a second time."

Bah... I hadn't taken her seriously and now I was in a dangerous situation again. There was still far too much time left on trigger respawn. I couldn't breathe, but he could get that collar on me long before I suffocated. I felt a cut around my throat as he sliced himself access through the cocoon and my armour without caring whether he cut me in the process, followed by the feeling of cold metal around my neck. There was a click, followed by the worst pins and needles I'd ever felt in my fingers and toes.

"Have fun experiencing the pain of your body turning to stone, over and over and over, with no way to stop it," exclaimed the fox-kin mage, his unstable and overexcited voice getting progressively louder and higher in pitch. Presumably, his need to gloat was the only reason he hadn't broken out into maniacal laughter. Which was fine, because maniacal was supposed to be *my* thing. Shame I couldn't, with my mouth covered. He should know that I grew resistant to stuff, though. Had he forgotten? Or did he think this collar was sufficiently powerful to overwhelm any resistance?

"Turning to stone? You said it was to kill her! What are you doing to my dinner?!"

I felt a stabbing sensation in my back, no doubt the queen collecting my kidneys before they petrified. Meanwhile, the pins and needles had progressed to my hands and feet, and I'd lost all movement and feeling in my fingers and toes. I couldn't see what was going on, but at the rate of progression, it wasn't going to kill me before I suffocated or bled out from having my kidneys unprofessionally removed. Presumably it was supposed to go faster, but my curse nullification was slowing down the effect.

And once again, I really had to wonder if the correct response to hanging upside-down, cocooned, suffocating, gradually turning to stone with spider venom still running through my veins and the offending spider herself burrowing into my back, was to complain about what a waste of time it was. Shouldn't I be just a *little* more upset than that?

Curse nullification advanced to level 21

Chapter 26: Retaliation

Suffocation tolerance advanced to level 4

Suffocation turned out to be the winner, the queen having glued my internal wounds shut, and the petrification having only reached halfway up my limbs before my air ran out.

The mage was correct, though. The choker came with me, and I already had pins and needles in my extremities on waking.

"New fashion accessory?" asked my zombie twin. Thank goodness she was still here.

"Queeny netted me out of the air. Turns out she's working with the fox-kin now, and one of their mages decided to be a serious grumpy-bum and stuck this on me. Cursed, and slowly turns me to stone. Extremities first, for maximum psychological damage. He figured I'd never be able to remove it, and would just turn to stone over and over."

"Sorry to have to say this, but you have a serious problem. This whole bondage fetish of yours is getting completely out of hand."

"Being turned into a statue doesn't count as bondage! Can you just get the damn thing off me, please? I have no fingers, and the only other method I have would leave a mess."

"Sure it does. At the speed you're going, you get to experience a slow and enjoyable loss of freedom and movement over half an hour or so. Plenty of time for fun in the meantime."

"Enjoyable?! Oh, let's see how enjoyable *you'd* find these pins and needles! Nice to see you're back to your cheerful self, by the way, but why aren't you worried about the demon invasion anymore?"

The petrification finished with my fingers and toes, leaving them as dull grey stone that felt cold when I pressed them into my still living skin.

"Then why are you watching it so intently and experimenting with how it feels? Admit it: It's a novel experience, and you're enjoying it. And you aren't the only one fighting back. I haven't been idle while you've been reminiscing with queeny upstairs. It took a while to get started, given that I didn't want to let any of the demon forces into the throne room, but I managed to infect some of the monsters that were hanging around at the top of the staircase. I have a good number of blighted demons under my control now, and I've already taken over a chunk of the fourth floor. Those brains might be a threat to me, but they aren't to the regular mindless zombies."

No, I refuse. No way was I ever going to admit *enjoying* being hit with a petrification curse. Which I was only hit with because I was basking in the feeling of my silken restraints instead of immediately self-destructing like I should have done.

...Okay, I'll acknowledge it. My responses to bad situations are all completely screwed up. Pain immunity, friend of fear and an infinite lives cheat all feeding into my pre-existing kinkiness have broken me. But I hadn't given in to the parasitic tree's promises, so obviously I wasn't *completely* devoid of common sense. Yet.

"Please get this collar off me before I awaken to something I don't want to," I begged, causing my zombie twin to burst into laughter.

"But maybe I want a cute Katie statue to decorate my throne room," she said.

"Katie statues don't have brains for you to eat," I pointed out, playing to her weakness. How can she complain about my behaviour when she's addicted to eating brains? Her *own* brains, nonetheless.

"That is a valid point," she conceded. "Is it training any resistance skills? Curse nullification, I'd imagine?"

"Yes?" I hazarded.

"Then you really should keep it on. I've seen demons that use that sort of curse magic. There was a big floating eye thing that could petrify and a succubus-looking monster that was trying to do something that outright failed on my zombies. Charm or sleep, presumably. You'll want defences before you face them. Give me a few more hours to establish a beachhead downstairs, and in the meantime, pick up as many levels as you can."

"I bet you tried very hard to blight the succubus," I muttered, my hands and feet now stone.

"Tried and succeeded, but don't forget that blighted monsters lose most of the abilities they had in life. I'll bring one up here once the threat is over, but don't get your hopes up. And on your next life, please try to pull a decent pose? And maybe remove your nightie? I'm going to need something to remember you by once you leave."

"The fox-kin think this world will stop existing once I leave. It's why the arch-mage was trying to stop me from completing the quest."

"Do you think they're right?"

"No idea. Queeny didn't seem to believe them, but I got the impression the arch-mage had convinced the other fox-kin."

It looked like floor four was going to get overrun with blight without my intervention then, but I couldn't blame my zombie twin for defending herself. She'd been reluctant to spread the blight until now, but an existential threat can do weird things to someone's morals.

An existential threat like the world blinking out of existence, for example. Maybe I shouldn't have admitted that bit to her.

Leaving the complicated topics as a problem for another lifetime, I lay back and tried to ignore the tingling sensation as the petrification took my limbs and started on my torso. Breathing became progressively harder as my flesh hardened around my lungs, and then impossible as my lungs themselves petrified. And then, just as I thought I was going to suffocate, it took my heart.

I woke back up a metre away from my previous corpse, which was now completely turned to stone. Apparently the process hadn't stopped when I'd died.

"Remember, pose!" shouted my zombie twin.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered. "I died before it reach my head, you know. You could have taken the brain."

"I know, but it was interesting to watch."

"And you complain *I'm* acting strangely!"

"Well, yes, but I'm you too, so isn't it natural for me to be equally weird?"

Pandering to the zombie queen far more than I should have done, I stripped and decided on a sexy pose, trying to hold it as the petrification claimed each new joint.

"Actually, that reminds me. 'Queeny' is ambiguous now. It could refer to you, too. Also, you do realise I'm not going to be able to hold my head or face in any sort of deliberate position on account of being dead."

"Just do the best you can."

It was progressing slower this time, thanks to the pair of curse nullification levels I'd gained on the previous loop, and I picked up another pair this time, leaving curse nullification at level twenty-five.

When I woke up the third time, I wasn't wearing the collar, and the statue had no head.

"Your best wasn't up to much," commented zombie-queeny, by way of explanation, handing me the collar still fully intact. She must have cut my head off to retrieve it before I resurrected. "All slumped and drooly. But I've captured one of the villages. The one that's to your left as you come out at the bottom of the staircase. Get down there and show that tree some real hell."

The first village, then. I nodded and fast-travelled.

New side quest: Clear the blight

This floor of arx sanctus has been infested with the undead blight, twisting monsters, people and even the structure itself to its evil cause. Purge the blight and destroy all that it has infected.

Clear conditions: Destroy all sources of the undead blight on the fourth floor of arx sanctus.

Reward: Gain one class level

Oh? Now *that's* interesting. How come I never got a quest for floor two? Maybe because I was the one that spread the blight up there in the first place. Rewards are lesser, too, but maybe that's because the blight only just arrived here, while it was heavily established on floor three.

I didn't have any time to ponder that mystery, because the village was a war zone. An imp dived at me from above, necessitating me to fling myself to the side to avoid it. It was slower than other imps I'd encountered, and the glimpse I had as it paused and readied itself for another charge told me why; it was already covered in oozing sores. It rotated towards me, flapped its wings, but instead of making the expected second attack, it started convulsing violently, showering the area in various fluids. The vines that bound it cracked and shrivelled as I watched, then the imp turned around once more, fell to the ground and ran off towards another patch of fighting.

The fighting was going poorly for dupliKatie's forces, and I saw imp after imp being cleaved in half, yet she'd pushed this far into the cavern. The blight wasn't winning this war through combat ability; the blighted corpses were far inferior to their vined, still living counterparts, and had no use of magic or special abilities. Even the imps couldn't fly. Progress was made simply because of the blight's virulence. What had happened to the imp that attacked me was happening to all the tree's demonic forces. Anything that attacked the blighted demons soon turned around and attacked their former teammates.

It was fascinating how similar the blight and guidance actually were. Both were parasitic diseases that seized control of their targets. The main difference was that the blight killed its victims, whereas the guidance took them alive. That was where the blight had the advantage; something alive could be killed, whereas something dead couldn't be resurrected.

Aside from me, obviously.

Actually, the blight had a second advantage. I didn't know what range of demons existed, but everything that had come up here seemed appropriate for attacking *me*. Fast fliers, mind mages, melee fighters. The sort of things that were useless against blighted, mindless monsters. If the tree started bringing up mages and long range attackers, things that could deal with blighted monsters at a distance without risking infection, the tides of battle could swiftly reverse.

A sudden migraine drove me to my knees, my olfactory perception blurring and stars flashing all over my vision despite the lack of light.

Mind magic nullification advanced to level 27

I felt around for the source, perceive presence picking up one of the floating brains almost directly above me. I flapped my wings, accelerating towards it, and bathed it in flame.

Or tried to, anyway. I missed, and not because it dodged. My flame simply hadn't gone where I thought I'd been aiming. Was it because of the distraction of the headache? Or was it messing with my perception to stop me from seeing its true position?

I flew closer instead, swinging with my sword, and this time my attack made contact. The pressure in my head abruptly ceased, and the brain dropped out of the air. That had gone better than expected; the first one I'd met had crushed my mind before I'd even realised I was under attack. This one hadn't. Had it held back deliberately, resisting the guidance? I could see a sore or two on it, so had it been weakened by the blight? Or maybe my mind magic nullification level had grown high enough to protect me.

From my vantage point above the battlefield, I could see pockets of fighting, but I could also see that victory through combat was not what my zombie twin was aiming for. Individual blighted creatures were breaking off from the groups and running towards the cavern centre, presumably trying to spread the infection over as wide an area as possible, while the minimum possible contingent tied up the opposing forces to let them get away. That seemed like a sensible strategy, playing to the blight's strength.

Then what aid could I offer? Joining in the fighting wouldn't change much. I'd be better off heading for the centre directly, severing the tree roots, or otherwise doing something to prevent the supply of reinforcements. Chances were very high I wouldn't have the opportunity to inflict much damage, but forcing some of the tree's forces onto the defence would mean less to fight against the blighted tide.

Actually, since we were going the blight route... I emptied the water from a canteen and swooped back down to the messily lobotomised brain, filling it up with the black ooze. I bet the central tree wouldn't appreciate being hit by *that*.

Armed with possibly the most diabolical biological weapon in existence, I flapped my wings once more and shot in the direction of the tree.

Chapter 27: Shadow

Bend mana advanced to level 6

Despite how awesome the description had sounded for that skill, I'd never really got much use from it. My ability to control mana was far too weak to be of use against actual mages and their creations, while the ability to use my internal mana to strengthen portions of my body never saw much use because strengthening a single part at the expense of the rest had rarely been advantageous.

I was getting use from it now though, concentrating everything I had into my wings to dodge the multitude of imps that were swarming me, desperate to prevent me reaching the tree. They were both faster and more manoeuvrable than me, but they didn't seem able to fight effectively at speed. Their species description had said their speed was for the purposes of running away, and while it made an effective weapon against a slow-moving target, against a fast aerial opponent, the result was that they failed to put any proper momentum behind their claws. I was taking multiple hits a second, but between my armour, chitinous skin and cutting resistance, they hadn't drawn a single drop of blood.

Which was fortunate for them, because I had a rather nasty case of blight.

I hadn't even licked the stuff, not wanting to risk creating any more zombies, but it was naïve of me to think I could bottle up that black fluid without any ill effects, however thick my gloves. I'd activated trigger respawn, given that I was about to get up close and personal with the guidance again, but ideally I wanted to crush my brain or die in some other unrecoverable manner.

Proficient dodger advanced to level 18

I evaded an imp that had been coming at me head-on, on the basis that our speed differential would have made his attack far worse, and plunged into the miasma. What met me on the inside was a complete surprise; the tree had gone.

No, not gone. *Shrunk*. It was there, right behind the staircase, but was now only ten metres high, with short, stubby branches. It remained the same dark shade and had no leaves. Presumably it had unleashed the army of drones that made up the bigger version, using them for its invasion of the abyss. Was what was left still made up of its victims, or was that its actual body? I wasn't close enough for either appraisal or proficient empath.

Nor was I likely to get much closer. The tree had a cloud of brains hovering above it, and had a half dozen of the five metre humanoid demons standing around it, each as very definitely male as the first one

I'd seen. The ceiling of the cavern wasn't high enough to get directly on top of the tree while staying out of range of the floating brains, so I couldn't bomb it from above. Suicide attack it would have to be, then.

I stashed my armour and magical items, wincing as my imp pursuit immediately started leaving wounds, then pulled out my deadly canteen. And then stopped.

Thankfully, so did the imps. It was hard to keep our attention on the fight when the ground had split open, a rent a hundred metres long tearing in front of the staircase. Doubly so since I could *see it*. I'd grown used to navigating this cavern with scent alone, but now my eyes were being blinded. Not by light, though. Shining through the chasm was a blinding darkness far beyond the little black torches of floor three, accompanied by a heavy feeling of *wrongness*, the crack looking like it had opened up in something far more fundamental than the cavern floor. It was more like a hole in the *world*. I shielded my eyes and backed away, wondering what the hell the tree was doing this time.

"Know your place, pawn of the Goddess," boomed a deep and familiar voice. It sounded very much like the dragon of the first floor, except that the voice was as *wrong* as the black light, more disturbing than nails on a chalkboard, and turning up in my brain apparently without the cooperation of my ears.

Please don't tell me I had a dragon after me, as well as the megalomaniacal tree? My eyes had recovered slightly from the sudden stimulation, so I unshielded them a little. There was indeed the head, forelegs and upper body of a dragon emerging from the chasm, this one covered in pitch black scales, but it wasn't me the dragon was looking at. It was the *tree*. Presumably the tree responded, because the dragon burst out laughing. Even up in the air, I could feel the vibrations as the caverns shook.

The imps started moving again, but this time not to attack me. Instead, they dived towards the dragon. The demons guarding the tree likewise charged, and the brains rotated until all were facing it.

"Your worries were unfounded to begin with. Or rather, you already won and didn't even realise it," said the dragon, sounding completely unconcerned. It lazily spun its head around to peer at me. "The hero has already failed her quest, after all."

...What?

Without deigning to explain what it meant by that, the dragon turned back towards the tree. "Regardless of your reasons, I will not permit your intrusion of my domain to continue. Return to the Void from whence you came."

The world went black.

New skill gained: Void tolerance

Sight is one of the most common senses, which also makes it a popular target. Saying that, normally people would simply turn the lights out, and not magically break through regular darkness and out the other side, where there is not merely an absence of light, but the true darkness of the Void itself. This skill will help maintain your sanity when encountering true darkness, as well as slightly reducing the strain it imposes on your body.

Side quest complete: Clear the blight

"What did you *do*?" cried another familiar voice.

"I didn't do a thing!" I insisted, checking myself for, well, *anything*. I was back in the catacombs, in my nightie. The canteen of blight-stuff was gone, and I'd lost my anti-teleportation bracelet again. Given my completed quest and my twin's reaction, I felt safe to assume that the rest of floor four was gone with them.

"Not a thing? Then care to explain why one moment I'm fighting a war—very successfully, I might add—and then the next moment every single demon corpse under my control just *vanished*."

"A dragon showed up," I said, simply. "It seemed rather pissed at the tree for invading the abyss."

"A dragon?!"

It took a second for it to twig that my zombie twin hadn't been so surprised that her voice had cracked, and there was actually a third person in this room. I spun around towards it.

"Do'myrith?!"

"Are we all shouting random things?" asked dupliKatie. "A mushroom!"

"Don't make me web you to the wall again," I muttered. "No, sorry, that's backwards. I mean, be sensible or I'll never web you to the wall again."

"Meanie," complained my zombie twin.

"Anyway, what's going on?" I asked. "Did I miss something important in the last hour? And why are *you* here?"

"I came to *save* you, after I heard what that mage did, so no need for that hostility."

"Thank you, then. Sorry, but I'm not used to you people showing up for non-hostile reasons. But surely my twin over there told you I didn't need saving?"

"Forgive me for not taking a blighted husk at her word."

"But surely the fact that I wasn't here was pretty good evidence that I wasn't stuck in a loop of petrification?"

"You could have been respawning elsewhere, to avoid her. She said you'd be back soon, so I waited to confirm her story. That's all."

"Well, I suppose I should be thankful that you didn't kill each other, then. Thanks for that."

"Great, now that you've got that straightened out, back to my question," interjected the zombie. "What the hell happened down there?"

"Black dragon tore its way through the floor, complained at the tree for a bit, called it a pawn of the Goddess, told me I'd already failed my quest, then nuked the floor. Damn kill stealer."

"Failed your quest?"

"Yeah, that was news to me, too. It told the tree that it had already been victorious and hadn't noticed, and that I'd already failed. Then it vaporised everything without explaining what it meant. I don't even know what it did, but I gained a new void tolerance skill from it."

"Sounds like you need to go take a look at what's left," said my twin, frowning. "Wasn't that tree supposed to be preventing some sort of demonic invasion? If that dragon was some sort of ruler of the abyss, and could do that any time, why didn't it do it earlier?"

"Just another way in which this world makes no sense. Which is a good point," I said, turning to the priestess. "Looks like you have some good news to take back upstairs."

Do'myrith took two steps towards me and slapped me across the face, hard. It was so sudden and unexpected that I failed to even consider dodging.

"Don't you *dare* say that to *me*," she said, her voice low and cold. "The knowledge that our entire civilization is merely weeks old, that we were created by the Goddess purely for your benefit... And yet here I am, respecting her will. *Despite* what you did to us. Since I'm obviously not needed here, I'll be on my way."

I watched her turn around and stalk off, fuming. The effect was only somewhat spoiled by the way she muttered, "Ow... What the heck sort of skin do humans have?" under her breath while rubbing her hand. Weeks old? She sounded sure of herself. Had the arch-mage found definitive proof of some sort? If he'd convinced Do'myrith, presumably he could have convinced *every* remaining fox-kin. That must be why they'd let him off for the soul magic stuff.

"For the record, she said that while he had irrefutable proof that this 'world' came into existence when you arrived here, the world ending when you leave was less certain. She chose to trust in the Goddess, but the majority of the fox-kin are hoping for your failure."

"Have I ever complained that this world is messed up?" I groaned. "No wonder those fox-kin guarding the staircase upstairs felt such existential dread."

"On a regular basis," my twin confirmed. "But for now, please get downstairs and find out what happened. I don't want to open the wall without confirming a hoard of demons aren't waiting somewhere on the other side."

"You're going to have to," I said after tapping the statue. "Both shrines on that floor are gone."

"Bah. You walk ahead then, and let me know the moment you sense anything alive."

"Hang on, I just levelled up. Give me a second to see what new disturbing body-mods I can make this time."

I enhanced appraisal from my primary class skills, then looked up my available tamer skills.

Skill enhanced: Appraisal

View the name, detailed information and current status of a target.

Stronger poison: Significantly increase the potency of your body's poisons.

Hypnotic aroma: Your bodily fluids gain some of the hypnotic abilities of the angelica vorax.

Exoskeleton: Develop a tough chitin exoskeleton to provide additional protection.

Luminance: Your body glows with a controllable soft white light.

Festering wounds: Wounds you inflict with your own nails, claws and teeth become diseased with blight.

Extra limbs: Grow an additional two pairs of clawed limbs.

Mana metabolism: You can metabolise ambient mana, reducing the need for physical food and water.

Crystal metabolism: You can efficiently metabolise mana infused crystal in addition to your species' regular food.

Prehensile feet: You can grasp with your feet with moderate dexterity.

Draconic might: You gain a very large increase to physical strength.

Ice affinity: You can cast basic ice spells.

Decay affinity: You can cast basic decay spells.

Festering wounds immediately thrust into my face the fact that this class may not have been my best life decision. 'Blight like symptoms' had changed to simply 'blight'. Even skills could be traps. If I'd taken that at level one or two, and then enhanced it later, I'd become a walking calamity without prior warning.

The other upgrades were more reasonable, and my new skills were *very* tempting. Obviously taken from the spider queen; I could gain a portion of her magic! But, with two shrines to repair, I wanted to repeat my attempted experiment of waiting for another level before picking the skill.

"Anything interesting?" asked my twin, so I read them out. "For the purpose of making yourself as inhuman as possible, obviously you should go for extra limbs," she suggested.

"No. But a few of them sound good. Draconic might and ice affinity are most tempting."

We made our way back to the throne room without me detecting anything living, so dupliKatie opened up

access to floor four for me. Inching down the stairs, expecting to bump into *something* at any second, yet not encountering anything, was worse for my nerves than if I'd immediately bumped into a swarm of demons. I continued to meet nothing for the remainder of the staircase, and the passage at the base was equally empty. I stepped into the cavern, still wondering when the other shoe would drop.

Void tolerance advanced to level 2

Ah. There it was. The cavern this time was brightly lit. Or rather, darkly lit, by a black raging inferno burning at its centre. A vortex of obsidian flame, painful to look at, rose from floor to ceiling, casting its darkness across the entire cave. Thank goodness for my modified eyes.

Alas, from the width of it, it would certainly be covering the staircase down.

Chapter 28: Peace

Maybe if I left it alone, the fire would go out? Fire had to burn something, right? It couldn't be going like that with no fuel. Not even if it was a magical black fire left behind by a bloody dragon.

I turned my back on it and fled a short distance up the corridor. The fire was every bit as *wrong* as the dragon had been. Looking at it felt like my eyeballs were being gently sucked from my head. Closing my eyes helped, but I could still feel it there. Was this what the tolerance skill meant about the strain on my body? And if so, it also mentioned some risk to my sanity.

Maybe the fact I'd already lost it offered more protection than the tolerance skill. I couldn't lose something twice, after all. Not without finding it again in between, and I'm sure I would have noticed. It wasn't as if I was going to discover my sanity hidden beneath a rock.

While the fire would be handy for training my new tolerance, I wanted to get the shrines repaired first. Fashioning myself a silk blindfold so that I could only see the floor in front of me, and not the otherworldly pillar of flame, I made my way to the first village. There were no longer any vines trailing the floor, nor were there the bowls or fruits. I didn't spot a single corpse. Perceive presence remained silent. Sense mana, on the other hand...

Evolution conditions met: Sense mana ranks up to perceive mana

Mana is ubiquitous throughout the world, present in the air, seas, earth, and all things, living or otherwise. Nevertheless, there are differences, and someone skilled in mana detection can tell much about someone from the mana they possess. You have felt the incredibly powerful mana of an ancient dragon, earning you this upgrade from sense to perception. This skill permits you to sense the presence and type of mana with moderate range and fidelity.

The pillar of flame was far out of my detection range, but that didn't matter. The mana it was outputting easily reached this distance. Even with the upgrade, I couldn't see anything through the glare.

It wasn't only the vines that were missing. Once I arrived at the site of the first village, if not for my map telling me I was in the correct location, I would never have known anything had ever been there. The ground was scoured stone, with no sign of debris. Thank goodness I'd looted the place already.

New side quest: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine

You have entered a sacred place, but the shrine that should be present here has been utterly annihilated by those who would contend the will of the Goddess. Make an offering to recreate the shrine and restore her blessing to this land.

Clear conditions: Sacrifice mana crystals worth a minimum of 200 mana to the destroyed shrine.

Reward: Restore the biome of the fourth floor of arx sanctus.

I peered at the quest description. It wasn't the level up that I'd been expecting, but it did make sense; this place was in even worse condition than the first floor had been. The question was *what* would be restored.

Would it bring back the megalomaniacal tree that the dragon had destroyed? The carnes multiformis? If it brought back the guidance, I'd be better off ignoring the quest. Even if it did, with the black fire still burning, would it immediately die again?

Which would I prefer to have guarding the staircase down? A mind controlling, rapist tree, or a pillar of flame that I couldn't even look at for more than a few seconds at a time? Was there a third option? Maybe there was, but I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be even worse than the first two.

Crossing my fingers, I pulled out a mana crystal that I guessed was worth somewhere over five hundred and offered it up.

*Side quest complete: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine
For making an offering worth more than 500 mana, additional reward granted: The corruption of the Void is purged from the area.*

I was standing in the middle of a bustling village. No, village was inaccurate. The shrine was still at the centre of a triangular plaza, but the buildings that lined its edges were larger and grander than before. There was more noise and stronger scents. Perceive presence picked up countless signatures. This was easily big enough to be called a town. Through my olfactory perception, I could see members of all four genders rolling around, and no-one was trying to kidnap, enslave, rape or murder each other.

I could also smell a lot of the many-limbed blobs staring at me. Or at least, I assumed they were staring at me. It was hard to tell when they had no faces, but the way that they'd all stopped and several of them were pointing in my direction was highly suggestive.

"Hello?" I tried, in the hopes that if they weren't at war with each other, they might refrain from attacking me this time, too. "Anyone around who speaks this language?"

There was no response. That additional quest reward, combined with the uncomfortable heat having vanished, suggested the pillar of flame had gone, so I risked removing my blindfold. My eyes showed nothing that my olfactory perception hadn't, only the translucent, ugly monsters and plain stone buildings. Things were much more colourful through smells.

Which reminded me that to these creatures, I probably looked naked.

The stand-off may not have been violent, and no-one was threatening anyone else, but it couldn't hold up forever. Should I wait here to see if someone who spoke English showed up? Walk out of the village? Fast travel upstairs and walk back down, to approach the entrance from the outside?

It didn't seem fair. I'd been here first, but now it felt like I was intruding on the town. From the reactions of the monsters, they obviously had no idea that they'd sprung into existence literally seconds ago.

"I didn't mean to alarm you," I said, trying to speak loudly and clearly, in the hopes they'd be able to relay my message later. "I will leave, and visit by the proper entrance."

I placed my hand on the shrine and jumped back upstairs.

"Well?" asked my twin the moment I arrived, leaving me to describe what I'd seen.

"I'll try the second village first, in the hopes of getting a level from that shrine, check out where the tree used to be in case anything time sensitive is happening there, then return to the first village and see if I can find anyone who speaks English."

"Just don't let your guard down," my twin responded. "Just because they aren't killing each other anymore, and no-one attacked you on sight, doesn't mean they aren't going to be able to work out what just happened."

With the threat of intruding mind control brains over, the zombie queen could finally return to her throne,

so the pair of us wandered through the catacombs.

"If this world really does cease to exist..." she started, before dropping back into silence.

"I'll find a way to bring you with me," I stated flatly.

"You can't! Bring me back, and you bring the blight with me."

"I'll find a *safe* way to bring you with me."

"Like what? Curing me? The blight is all that keeps me moving, and removing it would just kill me. Sealing me into some sort of hazmat suit? The blight would decay its way through, eventually."

"I'll get a mind mage to transplant your mind into my head if I have to. I don't mind sharing."

"You..."

My twin gave a big sigh, walking in silence for a few more steps before failing to stifle a giggle.

"I was serious!"

"I know, but you have mind magic nullification. For that to work, you would have needed to take the perverted masochist class, so you could turn it off."

"Or find a *really* powerful mind mage."

"Shame you never made friends with the giant centipede."

"So many things I could have done differently. And apparently, one of my choices has caused me to fail my quest."

"Just ignore that dragon. It was probably engaging in psychological warfare, since it knows it can't kill you."

"I really hope so. What *could* I have done to fail, anyway? If there was a time limit, it wasn't well advertised."

"Yeah, but we both know the Goddess doesn't know what she's doing. Just look at your health bar. Or don't, since you can't properly."

The zombie was right. There was no point worrying about it. I'd just have to work my way down and confront the dragon again. The dragon that had wiped me and an entire floor from existence with a single spell... I was going to have to get a lot stronger if I wanted to win a fight. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

Parting ways in the throne room, I made my way back to the cavern, intending to make my way to the second village.

Splat.

Okay, so, important bit of information. The biome restoration had caused the slimes to respawn. Oops. On the bright side, I had flame breath this time.

The slime covering my head, trying to worm its way up my nose, was blasted away by a brief burst of fire. There was still more around me, and I could feel it working its way under my helmet, but my mouth and throat were clear. My nose wasn't, causing me to sneeze violently as the still living slime regrouped and made another attempt at my face. Another sneeze showered the wall in dead globs of slime, just before fresh, living liquid once again tried to suffocate me. I blasted it off for a second time, and this time the slime got the message, detaching from me and dropping to the floor, fleeing towards a wall. I didn't let it, blasting it for a third time, and this time incinerating it in its entirety.

If I'd let myself be killed by a slime for a third time, I doubt I'd ever live down the humiliation.

I continued to sneeze and splutter as the second batch was emptied from my nasal cavity.

Corrosion immunity advanced to level 31

I was very glad of the skill evolution, which meant I'd taken very little damage from a living ball of acid flowing into my facial orifices, but it still stung like crazy. I made very sure to vaporise every last one of the nasty blobs as I made my way through the rest of the passage and out into the cavern, where I could do nothing but stare in awe. Or sniff in awe, or whatever it was my new olfactory receptors did.

The cavern was still pitch black, but what had before been a monoculture of vines, with a few many-limbed blobs eking out a living, was now flush with life. Or at least, stuff that was walking, slithering or flying around. I assumed it was alive, but with things like the blight around, it was hard to be certain.

Few things were based on Earthen templates, at least as far as I recognised. I was aware that Earth had some very strange lifeforms adapted to life in dark, sealed cave systems, so it was possible I'd just never heard of them. However, I suspected that if Earth had, to pick a random example, anything even remotely like the spongia cappilus, someone probably would have mentioned it.

It had a central body; ovoid, with a rough surface but no obvious orifices or sense organs. From it sprouted dozens of... very thin tentacles? Strands of hair? Whatever they were, they waved around in the air, drifting upward and side-to-side almost like they were underwater. If one happened to drift upwards and reached its full extension, the body jerked a little off the ground, as if it weighed nothing. It was memorising to watch, at least until one of the threads contacted a beetle that had been flying past.

Yes, there were beetles. Of course there were beetles. They had no eyes, with smooth chitin covering their entire face above the mouth, but they were certainly beetles.

As soon as the thread touched the beetle, it stuck, causing the flying beetle to drag the strange creature behind it. Again, it appeared to weigh nothing, and the beetle gave no indication that it knew it had a passenger. All the threads withdrew into the main body, including the one attached to the beetle, with the result it pulled itself up into the air and towards its new vehicle. Once it was almost touching, the other threads extended once more.

Then the beetle noticed, the threads tangling up its wings and sending it crashing to the floor. The threads probed around, finding and intruding into gaps in the chitin, before lumps started flowing up them, the main body shrinking as it pumped itself through them and inside the shell. The beetle convulsed violently as the hairy predator flowed into its body, then fell still.

I flame-throwered the still-feeding creature. Screw nature. That was *gross*.

Chapter 29: Rainbow

The ground crunched beneath my feet, no longer plain stone, but covered in coral. Earth coral grew underwater, but I couldn't think of these things as anything else. Intricate branching shells were glued to the rock, and taking out my torch revealed an array of bright colours, despite the darkness.

A few steps in, I took to the air instead. They were too densely packed to avoid stepping on, and unlike the hairy blob thing, I deemed them worthy of continued existence. I couldn't face the crunching as I destroyed them with my weight. A bunch of beetles expressed their displeasure at having to share their airspace, but nothing attacked.

From above, the landscape was even more spectacular. Things with far too many legs, or with no legs at all, meandering across the vibrant corals, all far more colourful than the greys and browns of upstairs. How ironic that all this colour was wasted in a cavern with no natural light.

I felt less sanguine about the environment when a ten-metre wide patch of the landscape bulged upwards

in front of me, a swarm of small snake-like creatures falling off the sudden cliff. The cliff split horizontally and opened up into the biggest mouth I'd ever seen, but I was agile enough with my wings now that a quick flap was all I needed to avoid flying straight into it.

Okay, so there *were* some things in the area that still wanted to kill me.

Nothing responded to perceive presence, not even the thing with the ten metre wide mouth, so hopefully nothing would be an actual threat. I gave myself a bit more altitude, so as to better cope with any further ambush predators, and continued my journey to the site of the second village.

Unlike the first, there was something there; an ornate, triangular structure ten metres tall, with a central spire reaching triple that. It was decorated with the corals, and had large, open windows. Aside from the coral decoration and sheer grandness of it, the style matched the structures of the new town. Presumably, this had popped into existence when I had repaired the first shrine. Had this shrine been restored as a part of that then? Hopefully not; I wanted my class level!

I dropped back to ground level. The building may well be occupied, and flying in through a window would be impolite. The doors, of which there were three, one on each side, were as empty as the windows. Little more than decorated stone arches with no method of closure.

It was indeed occupied, by three of the many-armed blobs, all wearing a scent I'd never smelled before in the villages or town. They still weren't wearing actual clothing, though, so I was once again treated to the sight of pulsating internal organs. I stored my torch back in my item box to save myself from needing to look at them.

They were gathered around a central pedestal that stood completely empty.

New side quest: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine

You have entered a sacred place, but the shrine that should be present here has been utterly annihilated by those who would contend the will of the Goddess. Make an offering to recreate the shrine and restore her blessing to this land.

Clear conditions: Sacrifice mana crystals worth a minimum of 200 mana to the destroyed shrine.

Reward: Gain one class level

Perfect.

No, not quite perfect. The overly-limbed blobs seemed quite upset at my presence.

"ttylkkyxxxzk," gargled one, freaky mouth-arm pointed right at me.

"Yeah, I still don't speak your language," I replied. "I'm not even sure I *can*. I'm pretty sure my vocal cords can't do that."

If the base cost was two hundred instead of one, did the other milestones change too? The last shrine had still given me a bonus reward for five hundred, but maybe the higher ones shifted? I really wanted to offer up a thousand, in the hopes of getting a third class, like had happened in the catacombs. The stones I'd collected from these blobs didn't go that high, but maybe I could offer more than one at once? Or I could just use the one from the dragon upstairs, which was worth somewhere over six thousand. It seemed that casual insanity was the trademark of dragons in this place.

Well, why not? And from the mana build-up I could detect from the trio of blobs, it wasn't as if I had long to decide. Proficient empath informed me of a cold indifference. They weren't angry at me, or showing hostility; they seemed to think I was just a random creature from outside who had wandered in. Without a barrier, it probably happened often. I couldn't communicate with them or understand them, and was, by their definition, naked, so I couldn't blame them for jumping to conclusions.

Side quest complete: Make an offering to the destroyed shrine

For making an offering worth more than 500 mana, additional reward granted: A strengthened barrier provides healing and restoration to all within its domain.

For making an offering worth more than 1000 mana, additional reward granted: You have gained one new class slot.

For making an offering worth more than 5000 mana, additional reward granted: Level cap increased by one.

The trio of blobs made some very interesting noises that proficient empath helpfully informed me were gasps of surprise, before all three were blasted away from the still-forming statue, striking the walls with wet thuds as their half-formed magic shattered.

"Really?" I complained at the shrine, once the cloud of dust had condensed into the traditional Goddess' statue shape. "I've had people trying to capture me, experiment on me, mutilate my soul, and the barriers didn't react. Now there's a few poor priests just trying to defend their temple, and you do that to them?"

These barriers really were a mystery. I was fairly sure they reacted to killing intent towards me, and the mages had got through because they didn't want to kill me. Wanting to wipe my memories and keep me alive and protected forever, while ensuring I never completed my quest, didn't count as sufficiently hostile. That couldn't be the full story, though. Sometimes, I felt like the Goddess was watching from heaven somewhere, tossing a coin to see if the barrier would react or not.

Continuing to mutter at the unfair statue, I helped out the blobs, who were pinned to the wall, unable to move, by dragging them to an entrance arch, where the barrier shoved them out of range, about twenty metres distant from the temple. The blobs might need to find some new priests, since their current ones got banned. Oops. Perhaps I should have tried harder to explain myself first?

Filing the blobs away under 'not my problem', I took back to the air and aimed myself at the former location of the evil tree while celebrating my rewards. Not just a level and a new class slot, but an increase to my level cap! I didn't even know I *had* a cap, although what would have happened after level ten, with all my skills enhanced and no empty slots, I had no idea.

First, should I enhance mapping or fast travel? Mapping could get me live updates of remote locations and enemy tracking. Fast travel could let me teleport between arbitrary points instead of only from shrine to shrine. Mapping was more likely to give a useful upgrade, and probably a bigger upgrade since I'd gained it at level two, compared to five for fast travel. Fast travel had greater potential for being amazing if the upgrade was good, but it could equally make little difference.

I decided on fast travel, because the chance of being able to jump between arbitrary locations was too good to pass up.

Skill enhanced: Fast travel

You can move instantly between spawn points and shrine locations.

Hey, I've been had! That hadn't even changed! The shrine locations bit was new, but shrine locations *were* my spawn points. Did it imply that I could jump to destroyed shrines now? Or shrines I hadn't yet visited? I'd need to try it out, but my dreams of instant, unrestricted teleportation were shattered.

While I may have made vast improvements in my aerial dexterity, I still wasn't up to reading my skill list or browsing new classes while in mid-air, so I continued my journey to the cavern's centre. There was no cloud of miasma this time, nor any sign of my body being attacked by disease, so hopefully the way down would no longer be blocked.

A hundred metres away from the staircase, the sea of corals abruptly ended. A few metres beyond that were a ring of marble pillars, supporting nothing, but simply poking four or five metres into the air. Presumably, they delimited some sort of boundary.

I dropped down for a landing and walked towards the staircase on foot. Or at least, where the staircase should have been. There was indeed a tree, and rather than sitting nearby, it was now directly over the exit. On the bright side, literally, it wasn't the same sort of plant as before. What had previously been black, scorched bark was now shining with its own golden light, which broke and shimmered in a hundred iridescent colours when the light from my torch caught it. It was still leafless, but that no longer made it look creepy. Now it looked like it wasn't *supposed* to have leaves.

"I greet you, chosen hero of the Goddess," it said.

"You can talk?!" I responded, the retort slipping out before I considered that its predecessor wouldn't *stop* talking. Or monologuing. Or monologging. No, not monologging; that's even worse than dupliKatie.

"I can indeed talk," replied the rainbow tree, sounding mirthful. Or at least, mirthful was my best guess, given that proficient empath was telling me nothing, and reading the emotions of trees wasn't exactly part of my Earthen skill set. "For millennia have I guarded the passage to the abyss, keeping imprisoned the demons that dwell there. Do you now seek to pass this way?"

"Not right this second, but I'll need to soon," I answered. I didn't want to jinx things, but the tree seemed friendly. I couldn't help but be curious, though. "Out of interest, has anything happened recently? Say, over the last few days? A demon invasion or something? Maybe a giant black dragon?"

The tree chuckled. It didn't even sound strange; a completely normal bit of laughter, with just a touch of incongruity from the fact that it was coming from a *tree*. "Nay. The demons know better than to attack. There has been no activity here for centuries."

This wasn't quite like the spider queen. She'd popped up and accused me of killing her kids, despite that happening before her own appearance, but this time, the previous war seemed to have been completely erased from history. The Goddess *really* didn't seem to believe in consistency.

"And, when I do want to travel downwards, you'll let me? No surprise quests, attempted murder, or perverted bondage games?"

"Bondage games? Whatever sort of hero has the Goddess picked this time? But no, I shall do the duty that is required of me."

That was an interesting snippet of information. "This time? There have been other heroes?"

"Of course. One comes along once every few hundred years. They never stay long, but things are never boring while they're here."

Was that real? But she obviously remembered a different yesterday from the one I'm pretty damn sure really happened. She'd only just started existing! Were all her memories fake, or was there any truth to the older ones? No-one else had mentioned other heroes visiting before. Besides, wasn't this entire *world* new?

And why did I immediately start thinking of this tree as a she? She's a *tree*! Were rainbows female?

"Thank you for the information, and for not immediately trying to murder me like most of the things I've met here."

"You're welcome, little hero," answered the tree, laughing again. Well, I'd take a mirthful tree over a murder tree any day.

It would be worth a longer conversation in the future, but now that I was back on the ground with nothing trying to kill me, it was time to finish looking over my upgrades. How had my status changed this time?

Name: Katie

Primary class: Princess of undying laughter (level 9)

- Class skills -

Trigger respawn

Item box {Enhanced}

Mapping

Appraisal {Enhanced}

Resistance focus {Enhanced}

Fast travel {Enhanced}

Secondary class: Aberrant monster tamer (Level 4)

Improved silk

Draconic breath (red)

{empty} [+]

{empty} [+]

{locked}

Tertiary class: None {locked}

- Combat skills -

Unarmed dabbler: Level 5

Proficient dodger: Level 18

Spear proficiency: Level 16

Proficient blocker: Level 20

Dagger proficiency: Level 15

Sword proficiency: Level 19

Proficient parrier: Level 11

- Resistance skills -

Friend of fear

Pain immunity: Level 33

Poison immunity: Level 34

Corrosion immunity: Level 31

Disease immunity: Level 40

Mind magic nullification: Level 27

Heat nullification: Level 30

Light tolerance: Level 4

Cold resistance: Level 20

Curse nullification: Level 25

Soul magic resistance: Level 14

Spatial magic tolerance: Level 2

Suffocation tolerance: Level 4

Earth magic tolerance: Level 2

Blunt damage resistance: Level 20

Piercing damage resistance: Level 20

Cutting damage resistance: Level 20

Void tolerance: Level 2

- Crafting skills -

Improvisational artisan: Level 15

Artistry: Level 4

Mining: Level 5

- Scouting skills -

Proficient stealth: Level 13

Perceive presence: Level 10

Proficient empath: Level 10

Sense danger: Level 6

- Magic skills -

Perceive mana: Level 10

Bend mana: Level 6

What? Why was my third class locked?!

Chapter 30: Respite

I mentally poked at my status, but it refused to let me pick a third class, or even display the list. There was no clue as to what the problem was, either. Was there some other condition? I didn't remember doing anything special last time. Was it a question of level? The only other time I'd seen the 'locked' description was on skill slots I wasn't high enough level to use, so maybe I needed to be higher level in my other classes to pick a third?

Regardless, there was nothing I could do about it now, so I turned my attention to my pair of empty skill slots.

Stronger poison: Greatly increase the potency of your body's poisons.

Hypnotic aroma: Your bodily fluids gain a substantial portion of the hypnotic abilities of the angelica vorax.

Exoskeleton: Develop a tough chitin exoskeleton to provide additional protection from both physical and magical attacks.

Luminance: Your body glows with a controllable white light.

Festering wounds: Wounds you inflict with melee attacks become diseased with blight.

Extra limbs: Grow an additional three pairs of clawed limbs.

Mana metabolism: You can metabolise ambient mana, greatly reducing the need for physical food and water.

Crystal metabolism: You can efficiently metabolise mana infused crystal in addition to your species' regular food, or inefficiently drain the mana from the crystals by touch.

Prehensile feet: You can grasp with your feet with high dexterity.

Draconic might: You gain a massive increase to physical strength.

Ice affinity: You can cast basic and intermediate ice spells.

Decay affinity: You can cast basic and intermediate decay spells.

Draconic scales (red): Develop weak red dragon scales to provide additional protection from both physical and magical attacks, as well as very high resistance to fire.

Draconic power: You gain a massive increase to mana reserves and regeneration.

Upgrades everywhere, and a pair of new dragon skills. Of the upgrades, most noticeable was the exoskeleton providing protection from magic, and festering wounds now affecting all melee attacks instead of only attacks with my own body parts. Neither skill tempted me, though.

Of the new skills, would weak dragon scales be better than tough chitin? Would the extra fire resistance let me use my flame breath with impunity, even if the damage was internal? If so, the combo of draconic scales and draconic power would be awesome. And leave me looking even less human than I already did... Admittedly, I would prefer the red scaled look to an exoskeleton. It would probably look cool.

My original plan of ice affinity and draconic might wouldn't affect my appearance and would increase my combat options. But again, there was no need to pick right this second. I could leave my slots open and take a skill when I encountered a situation that required it. And if the murder tree upstairs gave me class bonuses, then surely the friendly one here should too, with a bit more talking. Although that would probably just make me grow bark, or turn me rainbow coloured.

Could I get rainbow scales? I wanted rainbow scales.

First, though, I owed a visit to the town of the overly armed blobs. I took back to the air and flew towards it, noting with a complete lack of surprise that the town was triangular, surrounded by the same sort of earth-magic wall as the original villages. This one was shorter and thinner, though. They obviously had less to defend against. Despite that, there was only one gate, so I dropped to the ground outside it.

There were no other travellers around, but it wasn't as if they had anywhere to travel *to*. The fox-kin gate wasn't busy either. Like the fox-kin, this one was guarded, and a trio of guards immediately pointed spears at me as I landed. Stone tipped, this time, rather than the crystal of their predecessors. Presumably crystal was no longer available; I hadn't seen anything like the mana collecting bowls around anywhere. But given my skill options, didn't they *eat* the crystal? What were they eating now, if crystal wasn't available?

"krryxywwkklyct," said one, which meant nothing to me, but another trio of blobs rolling down the street at high speed seemed more promising.

"Anyone speak English?" I tried, but to no effect, so I took a few steps away from the pointy sticks and settled in to wait. Proficient empath told me they were scared, but picked up no hostility. Would they be friendly? Would they attack? Would I get anything out of it even if they *were* friendly? Unless they had very different stuff to the village they'd replaced, there wouldn't be anything of interest to me.

The answer turned out to be rather less interesting. The three blobs that had sped up the street returned with a fourth, who came to a stop behind the three guards.

"Go away," he said plainly. "We have nothing for you, and you are not welcome here."

"How do you know you have nothing I want?" I asked.

"Our prophets foretold your coming. The hero of the Goddess, destroying all that she touches and leaving chaos in her wake."

Wow... That was rude. I hadn't destroyed *everything*. Heck, I'd say I'd *improved* three of the four floors I'd visited. But they still weren't attacking me, and they were still scared of me, even the English speaker. And they still had no hostility. Forcing my way in when they didn't want me would be unlikely to gain me anything, and would only serve to make me more enemies, so there wasn't anything more to do here.

"I don't destroy all that I touch, although I'll admit the chaos accusation is more accurate than I would like. It's not my fault; things just keep happening... Anyway, I have no hostile intentions here, so if I'm not welcome, I'll be on my way. Nice meeting you."

I turned around and walked off, the fear behind me immediately turning to relief.

"Oh, one more thing," I added, pointing in the direction of the temple. "I repaired the Goddess' shrine in your temple over there, but the priests attacked me so the shrine's barrier rejected them and blew them all out."

"zzrkt!" swore the English speaker, not needing to translate that one for me to know exactly what it meant.

Again, not my fault! And I didn't destroy it, I *repaired* it. I couldn't help if bad things tend to happen to anything that attacks me.

So, that was it then. The fourth floor had turned vibrant and peaceful, and I had nothing left to do except extracting some more information from the rainbow tree and departing for floor five. Which was the abyss, and full of demons. And a dragon that had erased everything on this floor with no apparent expenditure of effort.

Wasn't there anything more I could do up here? No-one would complain if I procrastinated a bit, would they? And the tree did seem to have lots of interesting information.

"The strange little bondage hero returns so soon?" she asked when I re-entered her clearing.

"The *what*?"

The tree started laughing again. How was it even making noise? Was there a mouth hiding somewhere? Lungs on the inside? "I apologise, but your reactions are too cute, and you neglected to introduce yourself."

Oh... So I had. "My name is Katie. Pleased to meet you."

"The Guardian of the Abyss. Likewise. Do you wish to enter this time?"

"Actually, I'd like to hear some stories of the past. If you wouldn't mind. And feel free to ask if there's anything you want in return."

"In return?" asked the guardian, this time sounding pleasantly surprised. "I suppose I would ask for something similar. I am rather... *attached* to this place. Would you permit me to see your memories of elsewhere? To see the beauty of creation through the eyes of another."

"My memories? That's... rather personal." Friendly as she might be, I wasn't keen on spilling all my secrets.

"Worry not. I will only be able to see that which you permit me to see. Should you have *personal* memories that you wish to keep private, it shall not be a problem."

I blinked, having not even considered that part. Yes, there were certainly some memories involving me and my zombie twin that, while very pleasant, I wouldn't want to share.

"Okay, deal," I answered. New class features and skills, incoming!

The tree swayed in a non-existent breeze, one branch reaching down and tapping me on the forehead. My time in the caverns flashed before me. My brief time with the shouty mage. My time on Earth. Was that mind magic? It didn't seem to trigger my nullification at all.

"Oh my," said the tree as the branch withdrew a little, then snapped back down, wrapping itself around me faster than I could react.

The heck? Something from my memories had caused the tree to *attack* me? I struggled, but my arms were pinned tightly to my sides, the gentle pressure from the branch not being enough to crush me, but too much to free myself.

"You poor thing," continued the tree. "Never have I seen a hero less suited to the role. It must have been hard on you."

My struggles ceased. The tree was *hugging* me?!

"I thought I was doing okay?" I tried cautiously.

"Perhaps you are, but who are 'you'? The Katie I saw in your memories was not the Katie that stands before me now. The Katie that could never fight. The Katie that was prepared to refuse to battle the demons of another world, even with the safety of that entire world on the line. The Katie that was terrified of a harmless bug. Now, before me stands a Katie who can guiltlessly commit genocide. How much have you lost, sacrificed, just to stand here today?"

I knew I was different than I used to be. If ever I forgot that fact, I needed only to stretch my wings to remind myself. But despite all that, wasn't I still the same person? I was still the same Katie; just a Katie that had been thrown into an impossible situation, unable to escape, then magically detached from her fears. *All* of her fears. Her fears of losing herself, for example.

...Oh.

No wonder I was prepared to risk taking my tamer class. Friend of fear didn't just prevent my fear from interfering in combat situations. It removed fear of the consequences from *all* my decision making. The consequences of taking a rare class. The consequences of pulling out a blighted shield in the middle of a party of sentient fox-monsters.

I'd wanted this world to be a game, and the world had responded to my will.

I flopped over, the tree's branch supporting my weight without the slightest hint of flex. "Yes. You're right about that," I admitted. Thinking back on my decisions, I still regretted nothing, but they were certainly decisions that Katie the university student would never have made. Katie the university student wouldn't have been able to complete this quest. *That* needed Katie the immortal half-monster princess, who, conversely, would likely struggle back at university.

My musings were interrupted when the tree branch, which was still wrapped around me, yanked me closer, a few more joining in and wrapping up most of my torso. Now my wings were pinned too! "Whu?" I complained, struggling as the extra branches wrapped around me. How could I not fight back, even with my strength boosted by my class and a magical item? I suppose my base was quite low, but I should be able to do *something*.

"Umm... I appreciate the hug, but don't you think this is overdoing it?"

"Nope. I deemed you to be in need of a hug, and a hug you shall get," laughed the tree.

Damn that tree. I hid all *those* memories, and she tied me up anyway!

"Besides; this was what you wanted, was it not? Respite. An excuse for rest."

I stopped struggling. "What?" I asked, now thoroughly wrapped up in the overly happy rainbow tree's branches.

"The part of you that recognises your changes. Your old self, that desires peace. That wants to leave this place and go home. You seek respite from the fighting. From the self-mutilation you use to make yourself stronger. Yet you feel obliged to fight on, without wasting time. You value any excuse to pause. You were hoping a conversation with me could delay your journey into the abyss. Rest here for a while, while I share with you my stories of the past."

Well, yes, but I would have stayed of my own free will. It didn't require an inescapable tree-hug! Why were even the *friendly* monsters into bondage?!

Chapter 31: Inhuman

For eliciting the sympathy of an angelica tutela, single element abilities are enhanced to span all elements.

Sympathy. Hah. I took a few steps down the staircase to the fifth floor before stopping and sitting down, waving my legs in front of me in the darkness. The guardian had spun fantastic tales of previous heroes, but all of them were... *weird*. In what way does the blessing to drink as much as you like without suffering a hangover the next morning help you beat monsters? Yes, it was a handy ability, and I would quite like to have it, but it wouldn't help me here, and it was hardly *hero* material.

Of course, I had no idea how much truth there was to the stories. Of the memories I'd let the guardian see, I'd included the previous state of the fourth floor, complete with vined-up demons and the concluding dragon, and she hadn't even noticed the incongruity. Her head was even more messed up than mine. No, not head; she didn't have one. Where would a tree keep its thinking organ? Perhaps the lack of one was her problem?

But putting the tree aside, what was with that new class perk? Single element abilities? Is that element in the Earth sense? Like abilities that only work on iron or oxygen? That seems silly. Elements in a magical

sense, like fire, water, earth and air? I did have one fire based ability. On a whim, I started to invoke my fire breath, but concentrated on feelings of cold. And then stopped.

Right, that would be a stupid thing to do. I only had the second tier cold resistance, and freezing my throat shut before I'd even reached the bottom of the staircase would be a particularly foolish waste of my first foray onto the fifth floor.

Did I have any other elemental abilities? None that I could think of, and nothing on my status had changed. Oh, there was the ice affinity skill I had available. Did that count? On checking the skills I could buy, there were, in fact, two changes.

Elemental affinity: You can cast basic and intermediate elemental spells

Draconic scales (rainbow): Develop weak rainbow-coloured dragon scales to provide additional protection from both physical and magical attacks, as well as very high resistance to the elements

Ice affinity had changed to elemental affinity, despite decay affinity remaining untouched. Decay was presumably not considered an element in the way that mattered for my new perk. But also, rainbow scales!

I wanted them. They offered extra protection against physical and magical attacks, and increased elemental resistances. And I bet they would look *awesome*. The thought of my skin shimmering in the light like the rainbow tree was all sorts of cool. The only reason I didn't take the skill there and then was that I still had Katie the university student fresh in my mind.

Katie the university student would not have got excited about growing scales of any colour. She wouldn't have accepted them if someone had paid her. If someone had offered her a fox-kin tail or ears, she *might* have been tempted, but even that was a maybe.

I sighed as I continued swinging my legs. The first time I'd done resistance training, it wasn't just pain I was scared of, but I was worried about how it wasn't a normal thing to do. I feared for my sanity. Now I regularly tortured myself to death without batting an eyelid. That was... not normal behaviour. As time went on, I was embracing my changes more and more.

Despite my comments to the rainbow tree, I couldn't even blame friend of fear for it all. Yes, I may well have not taken the tamer class without it, but *after* taking my tamer class, I'd at least been concerned about the changes it made to my body, despite them being relatively minor. The wings hadn't been deliberate, but they couldn't be described as minor. They would be far harder to hide or explain away on Earth than my other changes, and yet I'd been *glad* of them, and hardly concerned at all. And now I was considering something that would cover my skin in scales. *Deliberately*.

Was I even human anymore? Was I as much of a monster as my zombie twin?

Putting off my skill selection for the moment, I continued my way down the stairs. The air grew progressively hotter, and the ambient mana was stifling. A dull, red glow shone from the walls, growing brighter the further I descended. The abyss was basically their version of hell, right? So, lakes of fire?

The bottom of the staircase came out into a large cavern, and this one was well lit. It wasn't quite a lake of fire, but a lake of lava was pretty darn close. As a child, playing games of 'the floor is lava' was a matter of course. Never did I expect to be playing it for real. Without my maxed heat nullification, I'd probably be dead just from standing there.

A narrow stone bridge, two metres wide and only one metre above the lava lake, extended out from the cavern entrance and towards a central island. Or central fortress, perhaps, given that the island had walls all the way around. There was a gate set at the end of the bridge, looking imposing even from this distance.

Perceive presence was blocked, but not in any way I'd seen before. Rather than hiding from it, *everything* reacted. It was like the entire lake was some sort of monster at an even higher level than the spider queen.

So, as if previous floors hadn't been hard enough, this time I needed to assault some sort of demon fortress? Forget that. I could just fly around it. Turning myself inhuman had its advantages. I took to the air and skirted around the edge of the cavern.

Sense danger advanced to level 7

I switched direction, a flap of my wings redirecting my forward momentum straight up. Moments later, a stream of lava passed beneath me, catching one of my feet and burning straight through the silk. A second burst of lava came from another direction, but with my higher altitude, I succeeded in dodging.

Looking down, I saw the head and neck of two creatures sticking out of the lava. Because of course this place would have monsters that *live in lava*. Stupid me. Their skin was dark, rough and stone-like, but was criss-crossed with numerous cracks through which a dull red light glowed. Maybe it was a stone shell over some sort of lava creature? The head was wide, flat and streamlined. One opened its mouth again, forming a circular hole, glowing red from within. There were no signs of teeth, but that was more than made up for by the glob of lava it spat out. No need to chew your food if you melt it beforehand.

I dodged again, but when I saw the lava lake ripple and three more of the monsters emerge, I decided it was best to head back to the entrance. I couldn't dodge all of them.

A sixth monster emerged, right against the bridge, blocking the entrance back to floor four.

More balls and streams of lava came at me, forcing me into a display of aerial acrobatics, swearing as I went. One caught my arm, burning me even through my armour and heat nullification. A few plates of chitin fell from me as the silk burnt.

Now what? From above, I could see that the island seemed to be a settlement, the interior of the walls filled with completely mismatched structures. Given the equally mismatched demons, that was unsurprising. Could I make it there?

Another pair of monsters emerged further along the bridge, before adding their own balls of lava to the bombardment. That would be a no, then.

One of the streams of lava clipped me in the wing, sending me spiralling out of control. Flying had been a terrible mistake. I'd note that down for next time, but for now, I couldn't see any way out of this other than death. Bathing in lava would surely be counted as an achievement for evolving heat nullification, so I switched direction for the final time, aiming straight down, not even trying to dodge any further attacks. I stored my armour just as I was engulfed by a lava-ball bigger than I was, then a moment later I splashed into the lake.

Evolution conditions met: Heat nullification ranks up to heat immunity

Fire is one of the more common elements of magic, and is used by mages and monsters alike, but magic isn't required to create excessive heat. Maybe an adventure will take you to a desert, or a lava filled dungeon. You have survived the fiery breath of an adult draco rubrum, major internal burns carbonising important parts of your body, the attacks of a hydra igneus, the heat of the abyss and a bath in a lake of lava. For these achievements, you have earned this upgrade from nullification to immunity. This skill renders you immune to the ambient heat of any natural environment, and strongly shields you from dangerously high temperatures.

Hydra! I knew that one! Wait... So, that wasn't eight separate monsters. It was just one with a lot of heads? But they were a hundred metres apart? What was going on beneath the surface? From the way perceive presence had reacted... Don't tell me that wasn't some sort of effort to blind it, but I was seeing what was really there?! A monster large enough to fill the entire lake!

Regardless of whether it was one monster or many, its presence made crossing the lake impossible, at least with my current level of manoeuvrability. The cavern ceiling wasn't high enough to get out of range. From what I'd seen of other resistance skills, the heat immunity evolution wouldn't be sufficient to stop the lava balls from harming me. I either needed to train my flying more, or take the scales skill and hope the extra protection was enough. Or I suppose I could walk along the bridge and see if they'd let me through. Stranger things had happened, and it wasn't as if I'd had any conflict with non-mind-controlled demons so far.

First though, since I was already at a shrine...

Evolution conditions met: Cold resistance ranks up to cold nullification

While less common than its opposite, fire, ice magic is still a relatively common choice, largely due to its simplicity. Or maybe magic wasn't the problem, and for some reason you decided to go adventuring mid-winter while naked. You have survived the ice of an aranea regina and major internal frostbite, earning you this upgrade from resistance to nullification. This skill greatly decreases the lower end of the temperature range in which you can comfortably operate and shields you from dangerously low temperatures.

Okay then. That... unexpectedly worked. Ish. The fact that I found myself lying on my back next to the shrine suggested that I had not, in fact, survived my major internal frostbite. But it was worth it for the skill evolution, and to confirm that my dragon breath had indeed been upgraded.

I tried my regular flame breath, happy to find that with the skill evolution I could dump my entire mana pool into it without burning myself to death. What next, then? Wouldn't an air affinity breath just be a breath? I mean, I breathe air all the time. I tried it anyway, and it caused a big gust of wind, but didn't hurt me and didn't have any spectacular effects. Useful for blowing things away from me in a non-fatal manner, possibly? What else could I do?

Corrosion immunity advanced to level 32

Acid breath, check, and that one didn't even kill me. Although, as I spent the next few minutes hacking up bits of throat, I kinda wished it had. Once I cut off the supply of mana to my fire breath, it didn't leave lingering burning coals in my throat, whereas this one left my throat coated in acid. Not ideal, even with my incorrectly named corrosion immunity.

I couldn't do an earth breath, but that was a stupid concept to start with. Any rocks small enough to pass up my throat wouldn't be able to do much unless I fired them out at bullet speeds, and I dreaded to think what would happen if such a thing clipped one of my teeth on the way out.

Light or darkness breaths failed. So did lightning. Perhaps the type of dragon involved needed to actually exist somewhere? Ice and acid breaths already increased my versatility, so it would be greedy to hope for more.

I'd try to enter the settlement through the front door, and if that didn't work, I'd take the scales and make another attempt at flight. Disturbingly, I found myself hoping that walking in through the front door *didn't* work, so that I'd have a legitimate reason to take the scales, beyond thinking they'd look cool.

I teleported to the fourth floor temple, which was unoccupied, but when I flew out of a window, I spotted the trio of presumed-priests camping outside the range of the barrier. The barrier must still be keeping them out, and they hadn't been replaced.

Would *all* barriers reject them now? That would mean they'd be unable to get back into their town, either. Hopefully not... I'd apologise, but they wouldn't be able to understand me.

I walked past the tree, down the stairs and out across the bridge. Nothing attacked me, even though the length of the hydra's necks was more than sufficient to reach the small distance. The city gate was closed,

with a pair of humanoid demons standing in front.

"Hah, look who's back!" laughed one. "I owe you some thanks, Katie. That's a hundred shards you won me."

The second guard huffed and spat into the lava lake.

Apparently, I wasn't going to get my excuse for picking rainbow scales just yet.

Chapter 32: Abyss

Wow. That was a lot to unpack. Starting from the fact that the demons didn't immediately attack me, middling on the fact that they had some sort of monetary system and ending with the fact that they knew who I was, along with my respawn ability.

"You were betting on me coming back?"

"Nah, on your chances against our pet hydra. I bet it would kill you. Grallax over there was convinced you'd escape."

"She did escape," muttered the demon presumably called Grallax. "It didn't kill her; she committed suicide to get away."

"Don't start all that again," complained the first guard, who appraisal informed me was called Bekretti. "Dead is dead."

I just stared.

"What? Something on my face?" asked Bekretti.

"No, this just... wasn't what I expected."

"Oh. We're demons, so of course you assume that we're out to steal your soul or something. Typical anti-demon racism."

Grallax spat into the lava again, which responded with a brief hiss.

"Sorry?" I tried.

"So you should be. Just a friendly warning, but if anyone here catches you using the name of our city as a curse word like all the monsters up above like to do, you'll find we can be very stereotypical indeed."

"The abyss?"

"That's the one. Anyway, the big boss wanted a word with you when you dropped by."

"The... big boss?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. So called because he's our boss and he's big. You're not much for this whole conversation business, are you?"

I felt lost and adrift, and it didn't help that the sea I was adrift in was lava and had a cavern-sized hydra living in it. Right, forget the fact that they were demons. I needed to just treat this as no different from first contact with the fox-kin. Admittedly, that had gone horribly, but at least I'd *tried*, and hadn't wandered in assuming I'd be attacked.

"Okay, fine. How do I get to him? Or her, since I'm trying to put some effort into not making assumptions."

"Nah, you were right the first time. And you don't."

"I don't? But didn't you say that..."

Perceive mana advanced to level 11

I was interrupted by a burst of mana from beneath me, and looked down to find myself surrounded by a pool of darkness. Sense danger didn't respond. Teleportation magic?

"Bye-bye," called the guard, waving, as shadows leapt from the floor, surrounding me like a giant egg.

There was a shift in the mana and the shadows dissipated, leaving staring straight into the teeth of something that was indeed very big. And also a dragon. I wouldn't call myself an expert at telling dragon faces apart, but I was pretty damn sure this was the one that had invaded the fourth floor. It was the way my face felt like it was being ripped from my head that gave it away.

Void tolerance advanced to level 3

I promptly dropped to my knees and threw up, scrunching my eyes as tightly shut as possible. It didn't help.

"So despite how far you have come, you are still too weak to tolerate my mere presence," intoned the dragon, and once again I wasn't sure how much conventional sound was involved. I could *feel* the words. I could practically *taste* them.

"Wh... Wh..." I stammered, rendered incoherent by the darkness pressing in around me.

The dragon laughed in great booming vibrations, each of which shaved a chunk off my health bar.

"The little failed hero can't even speak," he managed, each word hammering into my head like a nail.

"But I know what questions you have. Where is the holy sword, and why do I call you a failed hero? And also, how do you save your blighted echo, whom you have sworn not to leave behind? I will answer any question you ask. All you need do is look me in the eye as you ask them."

He knew where the holy sword was? He would *tell me*, if only I asked? My health was half drained already, so I needed to hurry. I dragged myself back to my feet, the room shifting and swaying around me, and opened my eyes. I could see nothing. I could feel a tickling sensation on my face, even through the cacophony that was assaulting all of my senses, and when it ran into my mouth, I tasted blood. A touch confirmed I was bleeding from my eyes, nose and ears alike.

I still had olfactory perception. It was blurred, but I could orientate myself with it. I pointed myself in the direction of one of his eyes.

"Wh... Where..." I managed, before an intense pressure forced me to look away. Just standing there was sapping my health. I only had seconds left, and this was the first concrete information I'd been offered. I *needed* to ask, and I wasn't going to let some stupid otherworldly darkness stop me.

Void tolerance advanced to level 4

I forced myself to look back up. "Where... is... the..." I squeezed out before the effort sent me back to my knees.

"So close," replied the dragon. "Should you wish to make another attempt, simply call my name. I can teleport you here from anywhere within this world."

Name... He hadn't *told* me his name... With the last scraps of my consciousness, I invoked appraisal.

[Untranslatable], draco inanis

Detailed appraisal blocked

Void tolerance advanced to level 5

I gasped for breath back in the catacombs. I hadn't felt so discombobulated waking up after a death in a long while. Ignoring the soul magic, the only instance that topped it was waking up after having my mind

overwritten by the giant centipede. I thought the abyss was supposed to be some sort of demon-filled hell, not a Lovecraftian nightmare that obliterated my mind and senses by mere proximity.

Now I had two problems. I was supposed to speak his name, but didn't know what it was, and probably couldn't pronounce it even if I did, given the appraisal results. Second, even if I did make it there again, there was no way I could look him in the eye.

And there was a third problem, if I was honest; I had no guarantee he was being truthful.

Perhaps I could work on the second problem first, before returning to the city. After all, weren't the black torches here the same thing, but on a smaller scale? I'd never gained resistance skills from them, or felt them hurting me, but it wasn't as if I'd tried. Now would be a good time to start. I walked over to the next room and stuck my hand into the flame.

"Ow!" I exclaimed, causing a zombie hanging around in the room to do a heavily exaggerated facepalm.

"Well, if you've got any better ideas for how to train my resistance against a dragon that causes my brain to ooze out of my face just from *existing* in the same room as me, I'd like to hear them," I complained to it. Alas, even if my twin could watch me through her zombie army, none of them could speak. I doubted she'd have any better ideas, anyway.

It didn't seem to be the flame part that caused problems, but the darkness. Sticking my hand into the flame didn't do anything. Perhaps I could have trained heat immunity that way, if it wasn't already such a high level, but it wasn't buying me anything now. Maybe if I made a bigger fire? Or if that teleportation offer wasn't a one-time deal, I could just keep repeating it until I gained the ability to cope. I'd earned three levels from that last encounter, despite its brevity. A few more would get a skill evolution, and that should be enough to *look* at him. Of course, if he didn't really want to answer, he hadn't promised not to do anything more active than simply standing there.

Regardless, he was the best lead I had at the moment, and at least he wasn't as grumpy as the red dragon. I gave dupliKatie an update on events, succumbed to her begging for a fresh brain supply, earning a few more levels of cold nullification in the process when I suicided by dragon ice breath, then made my way back downstairs.

"Oh, look who's back again," commented Bekretti.

"I could say the same thing. How long are your shifts?"

Including feeding my twin, I'd respawned five times since my hydra battle, so that was five hours minimum, and it wasn't as if I died instantly each time.

"Dunno. What's a shift?"

"Wow. If I ever get the chance, I'll have to talk to you about labour laws." They must finish at some point, surely? They had money. Someone had to give it to them, and they had to have some opportunity to spend it. Or did they just gamble the same hundred shards back and forth? Given how illogical this world was, maybe they were literally here on guard duty at all times. It wasn't as if many games had realistic NPC schedules.

Wait, was *that* why I never saw the fox-kin town when everyone was in bed? I'd never paid attention to who was on guard duty at any point. Would I have noticed if it had been the same set of guards every time?

"Anyway, you wanna go in? The big boss said you were allowed, if you wanted."

"Yes please," I answered, before thinking of the obvious. "By the way, what's your big boss's name? He told me to call him if I wanted to ask questions."

"Didn't you just talk to him? How'd you not know his name? Well, whatever. It's..."

The light from the lava dimmed. Strange shadows crept up the island walls. The air was filled with an odd susurrantion, seemingly coming from behind me no matter which direction I looked. There was, for some reason, a taste of mushrooms. And then it was all gone.

Void tolerance advanced to level 6

Bekretti's lips were still moving, but I couldn't hear anything and wiping my ears made it obvious why; my hand came back covered in blood. Never mind looking at him, I wasn't even in the same room this time. That was just from hearing his *name*.

"Sorry to interrupt whatever you're saying, but apparently hearing his name has made me go deaf."

The lip movements stopped, before he started shaking, bending over almost double and slapping his thighs.

"Yes, yes. It's very funny," I muttered. At least this was a way of training my tolerance and learning his name packaged up into one. "Do you think you can repeat that? Hopefully, I'll get used to it."

The next repetition gained me another level despite my broken ears, but ruptured my eyes. The third gained me yet another, but stunned me badly enough that I tripped and fell into the lake, where my olfactory perception informed me that a hydra head had popped out of the lava and opened its mouth wide. Deaf, blind and stunned too badly to flap my wings, I fell straight into the open maw, and it swallowed me whole.

I slid down a lengthy and fleshy chute, failing to get a grip on the slimy sides and splashing into a foul chamber of liquid. The stomach of a hydra was *really* not a place in which I was happy to have olfactory perception, causing me to add to its stomach contents with some of my own. Unfortunately, between my heat and corrosion immunities, being plunged into the lava-hot bag of acid was not immediately fatal. My suffocation tolerance wouldn't make it any less unpleasant, either. Unwilling to wait to be digested, I used the remaining air in my lungs to ice it.

Cold nullification advanced to level 24

"What did you do to our pet hydra?" complained Grallax once I got back a little over an hour later. "That was one mother of a stomachache you gave it."

"I assume it's used to warmer meals. Hopefully, it'll think twice about eating me next time."

"But you'd just have fallen into the lava instead. That's not much of an improvement."

"It wouldn't have smelt anywhere near so bad," I disagreed. Being squeezed between the heavy walls of flesh while submerged in boiling acid wasn't too horrible. Not silk cocoon levels of softness, and there was the whole suffocation issue, but it wasn't as hot as my fire breath and the acid wasn't the worst I'd experienced. Nothing my immunities couldn't cope with. If it wasn't for my new sense of smell that wasn't dependent on me breathing, I wouldn't have minded, and might even have enjoyed my hot bath.

Hah, trapped in a hydra's stomach. Another one for my weird bondage predicaments list.

"You were eaten by a hydra, and your only complaint is about the *smell*?"

"Yes. And yes, I am aware my priorities are screwed up. Now, can we try the name again, and hope that this time I can listen without my ears falling off?"

Both guards stared at me like I was some sort of alien.

Chapter 33: Game Over

Evolution conditions met: Void tolerance ranks up to void resistance

Sight is one of the most common senses, which also makes it a popular target. Saying that, normally people would simply turn the lights out, and not magically break through regular darkness and out the other side, where there is not merely an absence of light, but the true darkness of the Void itself. You have looked upon a creature touched by the Void, heard his voice and gazed into his flame. You have even heard his Name. For surviving the experience without falling into madness, you have earned this upgrade from tolerance to resistance. This skill will help maintain your sanity when encountering true darkness, as well as reducing the strain it imposes on your body.

It only took one more respawn to earn the evolution. With it, I could listen to the Name, which was fully deserving of the capitalisation, without going deaf, but there was no way I'd be able to pronounce it. That would require me to have a few dozen mouths and vocal cords made from metal. How the demons could speak it, I had no clue, but it didn't seem to bother them at all. Lucky them.

I also had the problem that I could see shadows shifting from the corners of my eyes, and kept hearing a quiet rustling behind me that I was almost certain wasn't really there. Yay. Hallucinations were just what I always wanted. Hopefully, another respawn would clear them, but first, it was time to put my new skill evolution to the test. Calling the Name didn't necessarily require speaking it. I just thought it really hard instead, and sure enough, the pool of liquid darkness once again pooled beneath me, raising up to engulf me.

"Welcome back, failed hero," called the dragon. "I was expecting you sooner, but then, I wasn't expecting you to waste time feeding your pitiful echo."

"Oi," I snapped. "That wasn't a waste of time. She's..." I paused, wondering exactly how I was supposed to justify killing myself repeatedly to provide brains to someone that didn't even need to eat. Cold nullification training?

"She's what? A soulless copy? A fake?"

"She's alive, and that's good enough for me," I answered. "Well, undead. I don't care about the details."

The dragon boomed with laughter, forcing me a few steps back. His comment about my twin had made me angry enough that it hadn't even occurred to me I'd responded fluently, and without bleeding from a single orifice. Yay for my skill evolution. I was under no delusion that it would help if the dragon actually attacked, but at least now I was capable of talking to him.

"Good," he cried. "Very good. Then am I alive, despite *my* lack of soul? Am I equally worthy of your respect? How about my brother, up above? The vulpes? The carnes? The aranea? Even the young that you killed were not lacking in intelligence, despite the ends to which they directed it. What of the angelica tutela? I overheard your conversation with your echo; I know you noticed the guardian's false memories and inability to comprehend the discrepancy. Does that make her less 'alive' to you? Not all of the Goddess' pawns were granted the same freedom to recognise their predicament as me. I envy their ignorance. Now, go ahead. Ask your questions, failed hero, so that I may take pleasure in answering them."

I opened my mouth to ask where the holy sword was, before changing my mind. I obviously wasn't clued in to what exactly was going on here, and I needed to be. A different kind of question was required.

"What the fuck is going on?"

The dragon snorted. "Good. You're *learning*. But not quickly enough. What do you already know?"

"I don't *know* anything. The fox-kin believe that the world came into existence when I entered it, and will vanish once I complete my quest. I have no way of confirming or refuting that."

"That is indeed what they believe, and they are completely correct. Should you complete your quest, this world, and all of us in it, will cease to exist. Your echo included. *Me* included. Thus, you see why I might

be unhappy with your continuing efforts. Had you not already failed it, I would not be talking so politely."

"Fine then. Since you keep bringing it up, I'll bite. Where's the holy sword, and why have I failed?"

The dragon snickered. "It lies within the hoard of my brother. You have sworn an oath never to touch it, or by any action cause another to take it."

It was in the red dragon's hoard? It was on the *first floor*? All along, it was *right there*?! And I had promised to leave him alone, but for the sake of saving another world, it wouldn't be so bad to...

Huh? That was odd. It felt like my train of thought crashed into a brick wall. I was...

I needed to...

The dragon continued to snicker, even the shallow laughter being enough to vibrate the floor. "A sworn oath is not so easy to cast aside, least of all, an oath to a dragon. The restrictions are engraved onto your very soul. No matter how high you level the soul resistance skill you place so much pride in, it won't destroy what is already there. Your oath is a part of you. Should you grow in power sufficiently, perhaps you could forcibly break it, but the shock would break you in turn. You would need to grow significantly stronger than my brother to be able to seize the sword with your soul intact."

So that was why he told the evil tree it had already won. It was that tree that made me angry enough to seek out the red dragon. Angry enough to swear the oath without thinking through the consequences. I'd felt the incredible mana from one corner of his hoard. I was *so close*. And I'd ignored it, because I wanted to burn things.

"Oh? Will you not fall into despair at your failure?"

No, I wouldn't. I was getting angry again. And not at myself, either. This world was completely fucked up. Saving one world requires sacrificing another? What bullshit was that?! Was the Goddess even 'good'? Perhaps *she* was the evil one.

Or maybe this really was all a game. This dragon willingly admitted being soulless, and implied that so was everyone else. Computer games back home were getting more realistic all the time. How hard would it be for an NPC to give convincing reactions? To make me believe it was alive and self-aware, when it really had no will of its own. Where was the cut-off point at which it became immoral to turn off the computer?

"Okay, next question. The world ends if I complete my quest. What if I leave without completing it?"

The dragon didn't laugh, but he did smile. I found myself staring into a wall of teeth, each larger than I was.

"At last, the failed hero has started to *think*," he said. "The power required to create a world is great. If it had been bound to you, you would have *burnt*. It has been bound to the sword. As long as the sword remains, so too does this world."

So if I left without the holy sword, this world would continue to exist? But if I returned to shouty-guy's world without it, wouldn't I be condemning their world to being overrun by demons?

Were the demons of that world as friendly as this world? Did I have any evidence that shouty guy had been telling the truth? Maybe it was the humans that had started the war?

Did I have any evidence the *dragon* was telling the truth? The arch-mage very definitely believed the world would end when I completed my quest, but that didn't mean he was correct. The dragon could just be taking advantage. Maybe the sword was part of *his* hoard, and he was lying to protect it. But the red dragon had said he was getting something out of my oath. 'Continued existence' would certainly count as

something.

With my skill evolution, I could look around the area I was in. The floor wasn't rock or dirt. It didn't seem to be *anything*. It was simply a surface, forged of cold darkness. I could see no edge to it, nor walls. Olfactory perception was completely empty, revealing nothing but the dragon himself. How much of what I was seeing was real? There was certainly no hoard here, but if he was going to pretend the red dragon had the sword, he wouldn't be so stupid as to summon me right next to it.

If I assumed everyone was telling the truth, what should I do? I couldn't get the sword, and even if I did, I would condemn everyone here to non-existence. I had no idea how to leave without the sword, but even if I did, would I be condemning the other world to destruction?

Think!

If everything everyone had said was truth, what workarounds were there? What had they *not* said?

Shouty guy had said the holy sword would slay the demon lord with a touch, but had never said anything about the demon lord being invulnerable to conventional weapons. Perhaps they just didn't have the forces? Whereas I was part dragon, with added murder tree, spider queen, zombie and more. I could fight now. I'd fought demons before. Could I fight the demon lord myself, without the sword? Wasn't that what a summoned hero was *supposed* to do?

Even if the black dragon was lying about the end of the world, if the red dragon really had the sword, it changed nothing. I couldn't take it from him. I'd need to check out the red dragon's hoard from an oath-acceptable distance with perceive mana, to see if the upgrade gave me more information and if I could confirm he had it, and keep my senses out for it while in the demon city or any other floors, but that was all. Perhaps he'd given the sword to the red dragon *after* my oath in order to take advantage of it, but even if so, I'd still lost.

When I'd first been summoned, I was intending to flat out refuse fighting, even if directly asked to. Now I was considering *volunteering*. As if I needed any more evidence of how much this world had twisted me. I clenched my fists and asked what I needed to ask.

"Will you help me gain enough strength to defeat a demon lord, and then to break out of this place?"

The dragon's grin slowly grew wider, until he seemed to have more grin than muzzle.

"I will," he replied.

For coming to an understanding with a draco inanis, you [untranslatable]

If the ability couldn't even be rendered into English, it had to be powerful, right? And I wasn't about to mutate into some eldritch tentacle monster? I didn't feel any changes, but stretching my wings, I'd swear the scales were a shade or two darker. Did I get any new skill options?

Void-touched: You have a whiff of the Void about you, and all who perceive you will not emerge unchanged.

Named: You possess a Name.

Umm... No. I'd leave those two where they were, thank you very much. But that seemed too easy... Suspiciously so.

"Why? What's in it for you?"

"You have witnessed the zealotry of the vulpes priestesses, and they are not the only ones here prepared to play the role the Goddess has inflicted upon them. Yet more may arise in the future. Your oath is not perfect. If one were to take the sword without prompting from you, this world could yet see its end. Removing you permanently from this world is the best way to ensure my safety."

A theoretical possibility. Equally theoretically, someone could ram the sword into my hands even if I was memory wiped. It was unlikely, but this world was *very* small. The same would apply even if I was sent into an eternal sleep, or sealed somehow. The only way to ensure perfect safety would be to get rid of me completely, and being immortal kinda restricted the available methods of pulling that off.

But was perfection really required? There were other options that were almost as good. I knew he could travel to other floors, and had effortlessly destroyed shrines, along with the entire carnes multiformis civilization, such as it was. He could destroy every shrine except the one in the abyss and keep me confined there. He could kill all the fox-kin, along with everyone and everything else outside of the abyss. He could leave me trapped *here*, wherever 'here' was. I couldn't help but feel that he was being nicer to me than his situation warranted. Especially given that his attitude made it clear he disliked me.

"So even you can't *destroy* my soul," I commented, thinking of yet further options he should have had. My body might be immortal, or at least easily replaceable, but I'd felt first hand how my respawn blessing didn't heal my soul. Destroying my soul would kill me permanently.

"That would indeed be a simpler solution, were it possible," agreed the dragon.

"What of my twin? My echo, as you call her. I imagine you wouldn't want me coming back to visit."

"Indeed, I would not, but that risk concerns me little. The flow of time here will make getting out an infinitely simpler task than getting back in. Take her with you if you wish. It would be another danger removed from this world, and I care not about what the blight would do to another."

His reasoning was plausible. So then, it was game over. Worse, it had been for some time. It was like one of those cruel early interactive fiction games, where you could press a button at the start of the game that did nothing but buzz, and a few hours later you'd realise you'd made the game unwinnable, but never had any warning. That being the case, it was time to start playing a different game. Screw the Goddess. I was going to save *both* worlds. I was busting out of here, *without* the holy sword, and I'd slay the invading demons myself.

Of course, it was easy to make that declaration. Actually carrying it out would be harder. I'd have the aid of this dragon, but little else. If I explained to the fox-kin that I was no longer seeking the holy sword, it was possible they'd help, but unlikely; they already hated me too much. Besides, the one of them who would have been most useful, the arch-mage, was already dead. If only he'd come to the same conclusion as the dragon, and helped me escape instead of mind wiping me, their town might have survived. It probably came from their limited lifespans. He probably considered a few hundred years good enough, whereas this black dragon was thinking of the serious long term.

The carnes multiformis wanted nothing to do with me, nor did the red dragon. The information from the guardian was suspect, and my twin didn't know anything I didn't. The spider queen wouldn't know anything of use either.

I hadn't explored the demon city yet, but as this dragon appeared to be their ruler, his cooperation presumably included them automatically.

My fetch quest was over. Hah. Five minutes, shouty guy had said, and I'd still managed to fail it. Just how incompetent could a hero get? But, even though I'd failed the quest I was summoned for, I still had a chance at redemption.

It was time to start my new main quest; to escape this place, rescue my accidentally born twin without causing a zombie apocalypse on *any* world, then slay the demon lord myself.

Chapter 34: Side Story: The Arch-Mage

When was it that I first noticed? Walking past the catacombs' entrance, as I had hundreds of times before,

the chilling breeze blowing from below led me to ask the question I had never before thought to ask: What idiot thought it was a good idea to build 'doors' that didn't close?

Dru'niryael didn't know; the building predated all of us, and no-one had preserved the knowledge. Then another question. Why hadn't we considered replacing them?

Dru'niryael hadn't ever thought of that, either. After giving it some consideration, she didn't see the point. The Goddess' barrier was better protection than any gate, and trying to retrofit one now would be too disruptive. She... wasn't wrong, but I felt like there should be better justification for not further fortifying our settlement against the most devastating and contagious disease in existence than not wanting to make a mess.

And that led me to ponder the undead blight itself. What the heck sort of nonsense disease was it? It kills its host, then reanimates them as a mindless, flesh-eating zombie? That makes no sense! There's no way something like that wasn't artificial. It would be beyond my skill, but I could see the path that one could take to recreate it, given enough time and talent. But why would someone do such a thing?

The earliest mention of the blight in our history was the last king, who supposedly turned to it for the sake of immortality. But it utterly defies belief that he *created* it for that purpose. Its effects are not accidental. It must have been very carefully designed to do what it does, and could not possibly be the result of a failure in trying to design a magical solution to extend one's lifespan. Yet if it existed prior to that king, why was it not mentioned in our history books?

Perhaps he *succeeded* in making himself immortal, and the Goddess twisted it into the blight as punishment for defying her will? Heh, I could easily imagine the look on Dru'niryael's face if I theorised at her that the blight was created by the Goddess. It was a look I would prefer not to see in reality.

Regardless, my musings were just that; musings. They didn't change anything, and I couldn't go back into the past to seek answers. I put my thoughts to the back of my mind and got on with life.

A few days later, a monster wave attacked our town. It was easily repelled, as always; with the cleared plant life giving us advance warning of approaching monsters, we could devastate their numbers with long range attacks before they even got close. Those that did successfully approach couldn't penetrate the Goddess' barrier, and soon fell themselves. I stood on the walls, aiding in the defence not so much because I was needed, but in case any monsters were powerful enough to have developed cores.

None were, but as I looked over the field, another thought occurred to me. Where had all these monsters come from? The cavern we live in is large, but not so much so that a hoard of this size could build up without being noticed, given their normal speed of reproduction. I asked Sru'taklin, but he was even less helpful than Mru'walyn had been. Not only did he not know, but he didn't care. As long as they kept attacking, providing us with food and materials, where they came from wasn't important.

Unlike the blight, which I could see a path towards creating given time and talent, I could see no path towards creating a monster. Again, the only theory I could come up with was that they were the creation of the Goddess. But the temple dogma was that the Goddess despised monsters, that they were soulless beasts and were to be afforded no rights regardless of intelligence or actions. Why would she create something she despised? Was temple dogma not the full story? Was there an opposing divine force?

This world made no sense, and this time I decided to get to the bottom of it. Or the top, perhaps. Books in our library told of a place called the surface, where if you went high enough up, eventually the rock would run out, and there would be nothing more above your head than air. There were fairytales of new types of monsters and, more importantly, unknown civilised races. Perhaps they would have history of their own.

I travelled outside our settlement for the first time in years, making my way to the upper caverns. If the

surface was up, that would be a good starting point. The upper caverns were neglected and unmaintained, and a group of aranea volito had settled in around the Goddess' statue. A few fell to my magic, and the remaining monsters were intelligent enough to stay out of my way.

There was another passage leading away from the Goddess' shrine leading further upwards, so I followed it, wondering all the while why we had no records of anyone searching for the surface. Why had my predecessors not come this way? Why had *I* not come this way? Why was it only the past few days that I'd started asking such obvious questions? That in itself was a question far stranger than any musing about the nature of the blight.

The passage ended at a wall. It looked natural enough, but the way it sat completely perpendicular to the passage, just as the passage had started to widen, was suspicious. Had someone *deliberately* blocked off passage to the surface? Hopefully, the blockage was narrow enough for me to teleport through. I reached out with my senses, using magic to probe behind the wall.

There was nothing there.

Nothing. I wasn't blocked, nor did I pick up endless rock. My spatial magic failed because there was no space to detect. Beyond that wall, the universe ended. There was no such thing as the surface. There wasn't even an infinite layer of rock. I attempted to tunnel through, to view the edge of creation with my eyes instead of my magic, but the wall was impervious to all I could throw at it.

Over the next couple of days, I explored our cavern more methodically, and discovered the true nature of our universe. A cylinder, little more than fifteen kilometres in diameter, the top not far beyond the roof of our own cavern and the bottom out of my detection range, below the catacombs, heading down towards the abyss.

How had no-one noticed this before!!!

It was completely implausible to me that none of my predecessors had noticed that the entire universe was so small that you could walk from one side to the other in a few hours. It was completely implausible to me that *I* hadn't noticed. What explanations could there be?

Mind magic? I checked myself out, and found no signs of external manipulation of my mind, or any traces of it ever having been manipulated. Soul magic? The implications of that would be truly disturbing. If I caught any mage in my caste using soul magic, their remaining life would be both painful and short, but... *I needed* to know. I let myself into the restricted section of the library and searched through our forbidden texts.

It didn't take me long to progress far enough to learn that I had no soul. Nor did any other individual in our settlement. *We* were monsters. By our own temple dogma, we were not people.

I felt sick. I spent a whole day locked in my private chambers, regretting ever touching soul magic. Why had I sought answers? Why had I not been content to remain in ignorance?

My behaviour obviously alarmed my caste, not to mention my family, but what was I supposed to tell them? I conducted more experiments, dragging myself further over the edge, staring into the abyss. I discovered the reason I had never asked the questions before; there hadn't *been* a before. Just like the way the universe cut off not far above our heads, time cut off barely a week into the past. I hadn't asked the question because I didn't *exist*. My memories were all fake. The whole damn *world* was fake!

A group broke into my chambers, smashing down the door. Some of the higher ranked mages in my caste, and with them my nephew, So'layn. I had no children of my own; I'd always been too busy with my research to take time out for romance. Or rather, hah, I *hadn't*. That was just my fake memories again.

They wanted to know what was wrong, so I told them. Mo'teckit punched me in the face.

"So what?" he yelled. "What has changed? Why does the size of the universe matter? Why does it matter if the Goddess made us aeons ago or ten seconds ago? This brooding doesn't suit you. Now get out there and get back to your work before I kick you out!"

I laughed. Not just for the first time since my discovery, but for the first time *ever*. All my previous memories of laughter were fake, after all, and I rather found I enjoyed it. He was right. Mostly. The lack of a soul had implications that I still didn't want to dwell on, but sitting here brooding wouldn't help anyone. Alas, not all of the group were so sanguine; So'layn didn't take my news well. The implications of our lack of soul implied that we were not, as the temple claimed, people, but merely monsters ourselves. Nobody liked the idea of the afterlife preached by the temple being some sort of lie, or, at best, not for us, but as Mo'teckit had so ineloquently stated, what could we do?

I had to admit the deception was well done. Through subtle questioning of others, I found no inconsistencies in our memories. If I remembered dining with someone on a particular date, their memories matched. There was no discrepancy in our history. If not for the little ways in which the world seemed to make no sense, I'd never have noticed.

Then *why*? Why was the world created in this way? For what reason did we need to fear the blight? Were we toys in the eyes of the Goddess, to be played with and discarded once she grew bored?

The why was a question I couldn't answer, at least until another clue dropped into our settlement from above. A messenger arrived from So'layn, carrying a sealed, hastily scribbled note. The text was simple enough.

'Found someone claiming to be from the surface, granted immortality by the Goddess. Priestess confirmed. Taking to temple now. Put that forbidden soul magic of yours to a better use and help me steal her immortality. I'll get her prepared.'

My heart lurched. Putting So'layn's newfound fear of his mortality and resulting blasphemy aside, finding someone from the surface, something that doesn't exist in this world, so soon after our world's creation suggested her involvement. I needed to see her and find out what she knew. She was headed to the temple? How long ago was that? I rushed over, hoping to make it in time for any discussions.

What I found was a mess. Sru'taklin and Dru'niryeal were locked in combat, *inside the temple*. Dru'niryeal was screaming something about them kidnapping the servant of the Goddess. Damn that So'layn! What had he done?! If this world was literally *made* for this servant that Dru'niryeal was screaming about, then things were not likely to end well for any who attacked her. Indeed, the only reason Sru'taklin hadn't overpowered Dru'niryeal was because the barrier was acting against him. He'd been recognised as an enemy of the Goddess!

I managed to interfere in the fight, just as Jru'belem and Kru'tapet arrived. As much as I wanted to blast Sru'taklin into paste, I didn't know what So'layn had said to set him off. My ire would be better reserved for him. For now, the first priority was to find this servant of the Goddess.

I demanded an end to the fighting and an inquisition into the servant. Jru'belem and Kru'tapet backed me up, leaving the combatants no choice but to fall into line. Sru'taklin grouchyly led us to an interrogation chamber deep in the guards' headquarters, then started ranting again about how the monster within could corrupt barriers and fool the priestess's truth sense. The utter moron... What lies had So'layn fed him? And how the hell had he believed them?

"He's going to kill me for biting off Si'janrii's penis!" yelled a female voice from inside the room, and Dru'niryeal blew the door from its hinges as she rushed in.

So much for immortality. The girl strapped to the chair, covered in blood, was blatantly dead. Dru'niryeal *detonated*. Everyone else in the room died before I even had a chance to move, So'layn included, robbing

me of the chance to question the idiot. Dammit! Did that woman not know restraint?

Dru'niryeal was glaring at the corpses with an intensity that suggested she was trying to will them back to life just so that she could slaughter them again. "Which one was Si'janrii?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"The fuck are you doing?!" exclaimed Sru'taklin, finally reacting to the massacre. "We defend you from that monster, that *you* let mess with our barrier, and you repay me by killing my men?!"

"You dare call a blessed servant of the Goddess a monster?!"

This time, I let Jru'belem and Kru'tapet handle the lovebirds while I took the opportunity to investigate the corpse. The first thing I noticed was that she wasn't wearing a pet collar, despite the claims of Dru'niryeal. Sru'taklin hadn't denied those claims. Had someone removed it? Why would they?

Second was that there was a lot of blood given the wounds she had. Yes, there *were* wounds, and I didn't need to be able to see the fresh blood on a few of the tools nearby to know they had been torturing her, but nothing looked fatal. She was clearly a different species to us, so maybe she was more fragile? Or had So'layn killed her by some other method? There was so little time between her cry and her death that I couldn't deduce what had happened, but from my cursory glance, I saw no obvious cause of death.

Alas, my trust in my fellow caste leaders had been misplaced, and in the time it took me to investigate the corpse, Sru'taklin and Dru'niryeal's spat had devolved to an all-out fight. A battle raged for hours, growing far beyond my ability to contain, so I focused on evacuating bystanders and directing the worst of it outside the city.

By the end, Dru'niryeal was dead and Sru'taklin had fled. Our barrier was destroyed. The next monster wave would doubtless cause further casualties as a result. Had So'layn not already been dead, I would have killed him myself for causing this. But the mystery of the servant of the Goddess remained.

Together with Jru'belem and Kru'tapet, we called together the witnesses. The servant was a female, of a species called human. She held the name of Katie. She had approached the town once before, and, most importantly, both that time and this she had approached peacefully. On neither occasion had she been the one to open hostilities.

Most wanted to believe that the priestesses were mistaken. That *Dru'niryeal* was mistaken. That the girl had the ability to fool their truthsense and interfere with the Goddess' barriers. Perhaps I would have found that the more plausible option myself, if not for the timing of her arrival. I had to assume everything the priestesses reported was truth.

Thus, Katie was *still alive*.

The Goddess had gifted her with the ability to defy death itself. Death was temporary, and her physical body disposable.

Since her physical body was so unimportant to her, did she possess the ability to abandon it? On her first visit, she had killed herself by slicing her throat. On her second, even after a more thorough autopsy, no cause of death was apparent. Had she simply chosen to flee, leaving her body behind? Then why slit her throat the first time? Why submit to their torture? Was there some limitation to her ability? Perhaps some preparation was required? Regardless of the specifics, if she had willingly left her body, there was a follow-on conclusion.

She'd deliberately lied, declaring So'layn her murderer. *She* set off Dru'niryeal. *She* started the fight between her supporters and detractors.

After her treatment here, it was no surprise that she would view us with hostility, despite her initial placidity. Bearing the hostility of the Goddess' chosen, the single most important individual in this world,

was not a position we wanted to be in. She was dangerous.

As for her purpose in this world, she had told the priestesses that she was her to retrieve an artifact of the Goddess. A holy sword, a divine weapon capable of slaying demons, who were invading the surface world. The surface which I'd already proven didn't exist.

The logical conclusion was that our small world was a trial. A test for the Goddess' chosen. We existed as nothing more than a hurdle for her to overcome. That was unacceptable. I knew these people. I'd fought monster waves alongside them. They came to me when I'd shut myself away. None of that was fake. It all happened after the world's creation.

Our world was created when she entered. What would happen once she completed the quest and left?

We were fake existences. Without her, this nonsensical world would have no purpose. It would no longer be needed. Surely it would be erased with the same ease as it had been created. I couldn't let that happen.

Immortality was no guarantee of success on her quest. I could entrap her and send her off into an eternal sleep, but wouldn't that condemn a surface civilization to destruction at the claws of demons? I couldn't trade my people for hers. Reconciliation was required. I needed to talk to Katie. Ask her to intercede with the Goddess on our behalf.

When I heard that she had walked straight into our town, side by side with one who previously sought to enslave her, hope bloomed. If she was prepared to forgive, reconciliation would be possible. I grabbed one of my lesser subordinates, one who had encountered her before and claimed to be on good terms, and together we followed her to the temple. When I saw the building lit up with mana, the shrine repaired and barriers restored, the hope blossomed further. However, she refused to talk, descending into the catacombs despite the pleas of my subordinate.

She continued to be slippery. As well as the subspace storage ability she had demonstrated, she also revealed an ability to teleport. She must be a skilled spatial mage. While her teleportation ability appeared limited compared to my own, the storage ability was intriguing. The cleanliness with which witnesses described its use, without any signs of spatial distortion or portal creation, exceeded anything I knew how to do. I found myself wanting to talk with her for reasons other than our existential crisis, as a fellow mage.

She refused to willingly enter discussions, leaving me torn. Should we force the issue, or would that make things worse? The other two town leaders knew nothing about the nature of our world that I had discovered, and I was hesitant to inform them. Jru'belem wanted to leave her alone, on condition she never left the temple, and used it only for transit to the catacombs. Kru'tapet voted to utilise any means to capture her, despite knowing nothing of the threat she posed.

Unwilling to risk her completing her quest while still ignoring us, I sided with Kru'tapet, with the compromise that no violence was to be employed. We knew her teleportation abilities only allowed her to teleport to shrines, so I had my mages set up a barrier around both, and armed them with potent sleeping gas.

Jru'belem and Kru'tapet wanted a trial. I saw no point, but they felt it would calm down the populous, and stem the flow of rumours that were circulating. People liked to pick and choose their facts, and too many believed her to be behind the earlier fighting, without believing what led up to it. If they wanted to hold a staged trial for the benefit of spectators, I saw no reason to stop it, but to me, I was only interested in what would come after. I was prepared to drop to my knees and beg if I had to, but I needed to save my people without sacrificing hers.

My decision was wrong. The sleeping gas proved ineffective, her resistance to it far higher than that of any vulpes, and in her attempts to escape, she employed the *blight*. *Blight!* Of all the things she could

have done, she chose *that*. It spread through our town like a flood. I watched helplessly as man, woman and child rotted before my eyes. The high priestesses did their best to save who they could, but it was only a drop in the ocean.

I evacuated the clean and the cured, and then burnt the city. I, who had been so determined to save my people, was forced to slaughter them. I stood and listened to the screeches of the already-dead, as well as the screaming of the dying. Those who hadn't yet succumbed, but who we had no means to cure.

Yes, I had made an incorrect decision, but it was not the one I thought. My mistake had been to seek reconciliation. If I wanted to protect the remnants of my people, half-heartedness wouldn't suffice. I should never have valued a people I'd never met and knew nothing of alongside my own kind; it was us or her. As Katie was the only individual in this world with a soul, I was uniquely placed to deal with her. I could attack her in a way that swapping out her physical body couldn't fix. I could attack her *soul*.

A soul couldn't be destroyed. Even if it could, would that be any different from her completing the quest and leaving? She needed to be protected, but I needed to permanently ensure her quest was never completed. I would destroy her memory. Take away all knowledge of her quest, not even leaving a hint behind of the surface or other worlds. The result would be a blank slate. I would raise her as a daughter of my own. Teach her to use her abilities for our people and raise her into an immortal protector for us.

My decision came too late. She had found a new shrine in the catacombs, and no longer needed to pass through our area. I considered my options as I tried to get the survivors of the blight stabilised, and stop its continued spread around our cavern. Going down there on my own would require very careful preparations, and even then, I couldn't protect myself from the blight for long enough to conduct any sort of search. I started producing potions that would provide temporary protection, but truthfully, I knew I'd already lost. If she never came back up here, or didn't remain close to the entrance, I would almost certainly never find her. She had successfully made her escape.

Why did Dru'niryeal have to die? If she were here, perhaps Katie could have been guided away from hostility. If she were here, the blight could have been purged from our town. If she were here, searching the catacombs would be trivial. The lesser priestesses could protect a group, but not for long. It would still be insufficient to conduct a search. I could do little but wait for the end to come, the only comfort being that I would be unlikely to notice when it did. Blinking out of existence wouldn't leave much of a chance for pain, after all.

This time, fortune turned in my favour. Katie reappeared in our cavern, tripping a circle of detection runes I'd left around the scorched remains of our former town. I couldn't resist the urge to speak to her, to see what she thought of our people. She showed not a shred of guilt for the deaths she had caused, and my last doubts about my course of action evaporated. I sent her to sleep and teleported her back to my chambers. My *cave*. Damn her. But it was over now. I had her, and she would remain asleep while I prepared to reset her soul.

She died. She didn't wake up; I was certain of that. She simply died in her sleep, for no apparent reason. No apparent *biological* reason. I was in the middle of carefully crafting soul magic, so I saw the truth. Her soul plucked cleanly from her body while she slept.

The time between when I'd first started speaking to her and her death had been almost exactly one hour. That matched her death at the hands of So'layn, too. Hadn't her death come about an hour after the attack on the temple? And the instance of the blight. An hour between her capture at the upper shrine and her death in the Halls of Truth. *That* was the limitation. Why she had slit her throat on her first visit. Why she had submitted to So'layn's torture.

The only question that remained was whether it was automatic. Was incapacitation enough to start the countdown, or did it require conscious action on her part? If so, a surprise sleep spell could capture her.

But could I be *absolutely* certain that she wouldn't have time to trigger it before the spell took effect? I couldn't. The better alternative was to prepare beforehand, so that I could do what needed to be done within the hour window.

I may not have finished in time during her last capture, but the preparations I'd made would be useful. With the measurements of her mana and her soul, searching would no longer be required; I could build detectors. I could imbue the memory wiping spell into a weapon. I dispatched a team to the catacombs, entrusting the enchanted dagger to one of my senior mages. One who knew the truth and would not be afraid to do what must be done.

He failed. The group came back without him, *Sru'taklin* having killed him in defence of Katie. The same *Sru'taklin* that had murdered *Dru'niryeal* to protect our settlement from an insidious monster that had corrupted the priestesses and the shrines. Having witnessed irrefutable proof that Katie was the Goddess' chosen, and that I had attempted to use soul magic against her, he had switched sides.

So be it. I wanted to keep the knowledge to those who already had it, but I was forced to explain myself. The fact that we were monsters. Toys of the Goddess. Nothing more than an obstacle for Katie to overcome. That once she completed her quest, our usefulness would be at an end.

We lost three more people that night. There was no violence. One was found in a shaft deep in the mine, with a noose around his neck. One stepped outside to think, and never came back. The third simply disappeared without a trace.

Those who were left agreed that my course of action was correct. Even the priestesses. They simply didn't believe that I would succeed. "If our role was to be an obstacle, then an obstacle we should be," declared *Do'myrith*.

Able to act more openly, and having confirmed the catacombs' shrine repelled the blight, I had trusted mages stand guard at each statue. The moment she teleported in or resurrected, I would have her. Yet still she remained slippery. A mage caught her but lost his life in the process. She escaped me by suicide, despite complete paralysis of her limbs. She could use her subspace storage without any vocalisations or motions. That was beyond expectations, but I could compensate.

An hour later, the mage stationed upstairs activated his enchanted dagger, but Katie didn't appear. Had she escaped somehow? Had she gained resistance to *teleportation*? I teleported upstairs myself.

Blight!

As if more evidence was needed for her lack of remorse, she had once again wielded blight as a weapon. Thankfully, I had reached the suffering mage in time. With the aid of a high priestess, we were able to purify him.

Meanwhile, Katie restored the town's barrier for the second time. What a joke. An area of scorched earth, with better protection than our caves. I returned to the cave that was my new home. Were the priestesses correct? Had I been *made* to lose? To present a challenge, but to fail no matter how hard I tried? Was protecting my people impossible? Another rune triggered, indicating the death of the mage stationed in the catacombs. It was all useless. If only *So'layn* hadn't tried to capture her...

As I sat stewing in regret, I felt a dagger activate. Who? There were no mages left guarding the shrines. Had someone finally caught her?

A blighted monster appeared in my room, emitting an aura of such virulence that my skin dried and cracked instantly. I couldn't help but laugh. She'd used my own dagger against me, trying to kill off the last of us with the blight. I let the fire burst from me, incinerating the monster along with the contents of my room. A crown dropped to the floor, undamaged despite the heat that had turned all other metal in the room to glowing liquid.

I looked at the crown and saw it for what it was. All I needed to do was wear it, and the blight would be *mine* to control. I could turn the catacombs against Katie. Direct the blight away from our cavern. All it would cost was my soul, and I didn't have one of them to start with.

No. I would never become *that*. It was my own enchanted dagger she had used. I could follow the path of the spatial magic with ease. I prepared the soul magic, teleported to the dagger's previous location, and beheld Katie in front of me. She'd changed her armour, and her hair had turned white, but it was *her*. Prone, face-down, struggling to move on the floor, presumably injured in her fight against the blighted monster. I struck her with the full force of my spell, and she didn't even try to dodge. It was over. I'd won.

"Was that supposed to do something?" she said, still prone on the floor. "I didn't feel anything?"

What?

My barrier activated, a single use shield that I wore at all times, just in case. I spun around to see *another* Katie behind me, in the process of taking a sword from her subspace storage. I blocked the blow, only for the room to suddenly tilt.

No, it wasn't the room. When my own lower body came into sight of my rotating vision, the extent of my failure became apparent.

The second Katie thrust her sword towards me, but there was nothing I could do. I'd lost. Oblivion would take me, Katie would succeed in her quest, and the fleeting existence of the vulpes sagax would soon be over.

Chapter 35: Side Story: What if? (Blighted Champion)

"I'm still not convinced this was a good idea," complained the white-haired, yellow-eyed young woman as she hopped over another thick vine, her way lit by a burning black torch she was carrying. "I know I said you should take that class, but I wasn't being serious."

The vine behind her started darkening as she passed.

"I know, but I made you, so I'm taking responsibility," said the second young woman, identical in every way to the first, except for the crown she wore. The queen and champion of the blight. "Even without my first skill, I wasn't going to abandon you to an eternal, isolated undeath. Besides, you heard that arch-mage. This world isn't real, and neither are the people in it. They're just programmed to think they are, so it doesn't matter if we blight them all."

"*They* think they're real," pointed out the first girl. "Besides, if they aren't real, why do you think I am? Or *you*, for that matter. You obviously no longer have a soul, so doesn't that equally make you a fake, magically programmed to think you're alive?"

The blighted champion paused in her walk. "Good point. But I still respawn, and I still have my classes and skills, so there must be something there. Besides, if I still had a soul, that weird spell the arch-mage blasted me with probably would have been fatal in a way that my respawn cheat couldn't fix."

"Rather a moot point when you *already* killed yourself in a way that respawn couldn't fix," muttered the girl.

The crowned woman didn't respond, busy peering off into space. "Oh, another one," she said, a couple of seconds later.

"Huh? Another what?"

"I got a quest to clear this floor of blight. Think I could abuse that by committing suicide, coming back down and repeating?"

"You realise how many vines have already been infected, right? And they all seem interconnected, too."

You'd probably have to burn down the entire cavern. It's not even as if you could build a firebreak around the bits that are already blighted, because you'll just infect more of it around wherever you try to cut."

"True. What's with all these vines, anyway? They seem to be pumping mana somewhere."

"I can't sense mana anymore, so I'm afraid I can't see. They look kind of gross, though."

The first girl stooped to inspect a vine more closely, which immediately started blackening.

"All the mana is running in the same direction," added the champion. "Let's check out where it leads."

The pair of zombies dawdled along, following the flows of mana.

"Hey, there's something over there," called the girl, pointing to where the vines rose from the floor, joining into a large bowl structure.

"Interesting. It's gathering mana from the air and pumping it into the vines," said the champion, getting closer. The crystals turned black at a far faster rate than the vines, and the bowl rapidly cracked and rotted, the mana it was sending into the system of roots turning foul and corrupted. Lines of black rapidly snaked down the vines and off out of view, from where there came a distant scream.

"I... think you just made someone very unhappy. Someone *big*."

"*Very big*," agreed the champion, using her magic crown to view the spread of blight, before tilting her head in confusion. "No, wait. It suddenly shrunk. And I'm not sure it's a 'someone'. It seems *tree* shaped."

"Trees do not generally scream," pointed out the girl. "Then again, I suppose they don't generally eat people either, but that never stopped the one upstairs."

"Nor do they normally shrink like that," added the champion. "Well, no point wondering. Let's go take a look."

They continued their journey, the next point of interest being a fruiting body wrapped around a stalagmite.

"A bunch of the mana is flowing into the fruit. Maybe it uses it to grow?"

"The air around here is weird. Are you sure that thing is safe?"

"Yeah. It's releasing something into the air that disease nullification is unhappy about, but the blight is killing whatever it is off before it can do any damage. Seeds, presumably, since the blight doesn't do anything to viruses or bacteria."

"Wow. What does it need seeds for if the cavern is one big plant?" asked the girl, leaning in closer.

"Stay back! Get away!" screamed the fruit, causing her to jerk backward in surprise.

"Umm... You heard that, right?" she asked the champion. "That wasn't just me going crazy. Crazier."

"Yup. I heard it. You can speak? That's a cool trick. Where does the sound come from?"

"You... *Why?*" screamed the plant. "This cavern was *mine*! Soon, so would have been the world, but now you bring the *blight* here!"

The champion blinked. "Wow, not only can it talk, but it's planning to take over the world?"

The girl didn't respond, instead making strange gurgling noises before collapsing face first to the ground.

The champion swung around, noting the crystal arrow embedded in the girl's spine. A response from her sense danger skill caused her to dive to the side, moments before an arrow passed through her previous location.

"Well, that was rude," she muttered, leaping back to her feet while showing no concern for her dead

partner. The attackers weren't in sight, nor could she hear or sense anything.

"Who's out there?" she shouted. "Keep away if you don't want to be blighted."

There was no response other than more reactions from sense danger, as a rain of arrows struck her location, none of which pierced her heavy shield.

Sense mana reacted, but sense danger did not. With no guide as to what was happening, the champion hesitated, allowing the hidden mages to finish their spell. Stalagmites burst up all around her, forming a circular prison.

"Poo," she muttered, as shapes revealed themselves, stepping into the darkness that shone from her torch.

"You really shouldn't get... close... to... What the fuck are *you*?!"

The champion stared in disbelief at the creatures that approached her, the balls of arms appearing so alien that it took her some time to comprehend what she was looking at. With translucent skin and half of them completely naked, with the other half only wrapped in vines, it was hard to imagine them as the sort of monsters that would be capable of wielding weapons. Yet the naked ones all had spears or bows.

"You may have defeated me, but I will at least take you down with me," said *everything*. The same voice came from the fruit and every one of the monsters.

"And once again I ask, what *are* you?" asked the champion. "And by the way, I'm..."

The monsters interrupted the champions' deceleration of immortality by running her through with half a dozen spears, the champion utterly unable to defend while trapped in a stone prison and surrounded by enemies.

"Well, that was rude," complained the champion, waking back up in the catacombs. She invoked her first class skill, *reanimate minion*, causing a cloud of dust to spring into existence and form up into her partner over a period of a few minutes.

And, while it was in progress, she noticed the unexpected addition to her status.

"Ow," muttered the girl. "What killed me? I didn't see it coming at all!"

"It was... You know, I saw them, and have *appraisal*, and I *still* have no idea. Transparent blobs with far too many arms. *Appraisal* called them *carnes multiformis*. Some sort of hivemind, possibly, given the way they were all speaking the same thing at the same time. One of them got you with an arrow."

"I sense there's a but coming."

"Yeah, too damn right there is. I gained a level! I completed the side quest!"

"Side quest? Wait, purging the floor of blight? Something destroyed the blighted vines?"

"That's what I don't understand. From the way they were speaking, they obviously considered the blight a death sentence. Yet in the time it took me to respawn, something cleared the floor."

"Then best we go take a look. *After* you pick a new skill."

The champion nodded and glanced off into space, her face twisting as she read the options. "For goodness' sake, who makes up this crap? One of the options replaces my bodily fluids with that black gunk the mindless husks leak."

"Yeah, you can forget me ever putting my tongue anywhere near you again if you pick that one. What's the other?"

"Much better, thankfully. It'll let me instantly infest a target with blight. The description is as sparse as ever, but presumably it'll cost mana to use. I'll take that one."

"Great. You can try it out on those slimes on our way back."

The champion frowned, the memory of that embarrassing incident still raw in her mind. It wasn't as if she needed to breathe, and she had high resistance to corrosion, but that didn't mean she'd enjoyed having a blob of living acid invading her internal cavities while her partner was watching and laughing her head off. "If they're still there, then yes. Very much, yes. But we probably blighted them on our way past last time. They're likely all dead already."

"No harm in making doubly sure."

"True..."

The slimes were, in fact, all dead, but not from blight.

"The heck?" muttered the champion. "What happened here?"

"Maybe our torches set everything on fire when we dropped them?"

The champion prodded at a pile of ash, from which black wisps of flame were still curling.

"No way. It may look similar, but that's not the same fire as the torches. That's... just *wrong* somehow. It feels out of place, like walking past a patch of snow in midsummer. It shouldn't be there."

"Wow. Are you breaking out in philosophy in your undeath?"

The champion didn't respond, continuing to move through the passage with her eyes fixed ahead and her senses alert. When the pair stepped into the cavern, it was in silence, and they continued wordlessly as they retraced their steps. Neither needed to comment on the missing vines.

"That's close enough, echoes of the failed hero," thundered a voice, driving the pair of zombies to their knees.

"W... Who?" stammered the champion.

"That's unimportant. I am here to offer you the holy sword that you seek. Long has my brother protected it, but we will give it to you here and now. In return, we ask that you give your oath to cease spreading the blight. Confine yourselves to this floor and the catacombs above."

The girl and the champion looked at each other, still struggling to move against the pressure of the voice.

"That's... a seriously unsatisfying end, but okay," said the champion. "Were you supposed to be the final boss or something, but are too scared of the blight to follow through?"

Great booming laughter came from the distance. "Not at all," came the eventual reply. "If anything, I am... a secret boss. One that you never needed to meet. The final boss would have been my brother. But it is a moot point; you have agreed to my terms. Normally, an oath would brand your soul, but since you have none, I shall make alternative arrangements. Fortunately, your intent is there, and that is sufficient for me to work with."

The pair of zombies stared in surprise as liquid darkness pooled around them, climbing up their legs and coating their bodies before fading, as if absorbed into their skin.

"It is done. And now for your prize." The voice sniggered in the distance before continuing. "Though I can't imagine what use the likes of you could possibly have for it."

The sense of presence vanished, along with the distant sounds, but in return another pool of darkness formed, and from it a sword rose.

"What?" exclaimed the champion. "Was this some sort of scam?"

In alarm, she leapt forward and grasped the sword. Nothing at all happened.

"It is, after all, the task of the hero to retrieve that sword," came the voice again, now sounding quiet and far distant. "You, her mere echoes, have naught to do with her quest. Enjoy your immortality, and be thankful you at least have each other."

"I'm the hero!" yelled the champion of the blight, to no response.

Appraisal confirmed the sword as the real thing. Alas, its mere possession failed to bring any conclusion to the quest. By the magic of the black dragon, the pair of undead found themselves bound forever to the empty third and fourth floors, unable to venture further in search of a solution.

As the dragon had said, the hero, Katie, had sacrificed herself for power. Admittedly, it had been for a good reason; care for the blighted husk that shared her memories, but good reasons were not always sufficient. As ever, the path to hell was paved with good intentions.

Chapter 36: Side Story: What if? (Chilopoda Kin)

Katie lightly leapt over another one of the pulsating, orange vines, once again noting the direction in which the mana flowed. How strange, she thought. It was obviously a single giant organism, rather than something like her own swarm that was made of countless individuals, but whatever was it doing with that much mana?

She continued her search of floor four, discovering the crystal collectors, and at least a part of what the mana was being used for, in the fleshy, disease producing fruits. Then another part of the caverns found *her*.

Tink.

Katie looked around and spotted the cracked crystal arrowhead on the floor. Fortunately, her shell had been stronger, and hadn't even taken a scratch. Her flesh underneath, on the other hand...

"Argg! Whoever that was, you are *evil!*" screamed Katie, scratching completely ineffectually at the chitin plate that covered her back. Given its rigidity, her attempts did nothing for the itch beneath. "Seriously. It's bad enough having an exoskeleton in the first place, however much better it is than my old armour, but how am I supposed to scratch myself when it itches?" she muttered.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, her attackers responded not with an apology, but with a larger rain of arrows. They clinked harmlessly against her chitin. "Okay, you asked for it!" exclaimed Katie, activating her sense vibration skill in an attempt to locate her attackers. They were surprisingly close by, but the complete darkness of the cavern had hidden them anyway.

Katie charged, and her aggressors shifted sideways, apparently not realising she could perceive them. It wasn't until she matched their movements that they ran. From the skill feedback, Katie could tell they ran on three feet, but the rhythm was wrong. It was as if they kept growing new feet at the front and losing the ones at the back. Whatever method of locomotion they used, they were *fast*, but their pounding on the floor was easy to track.

Katie slowed slightly, not wanting to run into a trap, and tracked her attackers until she ran into a gate set into a tall stone wall. A wall on which many alien creatures were taking aim at her with their bows.

"Ah, so that explains their rhythm. They were *rolling...*" she muttered to herself, as yet another rain of arrows bounced harmlessly off her shell.

"Look," she said, more loudly. "Isn't it obvious by now that your arrows can't hurt me? You're just pissing me off more now."

The monsters replied with yet another rain of arrows.

"Okay, that does it. I'm... Oh. Crap."

Realising that their arrows were useless, the monsters switched strategy, their earth mages striking with a giant boulder, crushing Katie against the floor.

She reopened her eyes sometime later, noting that the trigger respawn she'd activated in her panic was still running, with half its time remaining. She'd been out for half an hour, but hadn't died. It was still pitch black though, so where was she?

Her attempts to move failed. Pain immunity had made her slow to notice, but her limbs had been torn off. The attempt had been messy, and her captors had obviously struggled to penetrate her shell. Bringing a light out of her item box, she could see the cracks and gaps over her torso, where something had tried to peel her protective plates off her, tearing off a lot of her skin in the process. This return to consciousness would be brief; unlike her old armour, her new shell was as much a part of her as any other body-part, and ripping it off like that meant that she would soon bleed out.

Something else the light revealed was three of the monsters, standing around her with spears pointed at her throat.

"You've torn off my arms and legs, left me bleeding and dying, and you're *still* afraid of me?" asked Katie, failing to suppress a smirk. "*So you should be.*"

She activated the second of her class skills, summon kin, dumping her full mana pool into the attempt. Hundreds of chilopoda burst forth from the portals that opened around her, and immediately got to work. There were *noises*. Gravelly screams and the wet thuds of torn flesh, all set against a backdrop of manic laughter, still going strong right until the point Katie finished bleeding out.

Katie respawned and spotted the newly registered shrine, using it to fast travel directly to the village, where the fight was still ongoing. Although Katie had been under guard, they hadn't been expecting an invasion of that sort of scale, and had been instantly overwhelmed. While a few hundred of the centipede-like monsters would have achieved very little attacking from the outside, from the inside, with no organised defence prepared, they had caused a massacre.

Katie added to the attempt by invoking the skill a second time, and the village's feeble attempts at resistance fell apart.

Half an hour later, ninety percent of the population of the village were dead. The remainder were pumped full of paralysing venom and left in the village's central plaza. Katie invoked summon kin one last time, bringing in a slightly larger specimen. She did, after all, need to replace those of her kin that had died in the fight. It would have greatly stimulated her sense of irony to know how similar the chilopoda's method of reproduction was to their own.

"What strange monsters," she commented, petting one of her cute chilopoda on the head. She watched the breeder go about her work, injecting eggs under the transparent skin of the alien creatures. "They must be intelligent, given the village, but they never even tried to talk to me. Then again, maybe they don't have mouths?"

The chilopoda responded by biting her on the hand, its fangs cracking through her shell on her fingers, where it was thinnest, and pumping her full of its venom.

"Whu? Why?" she managed to get out, before the paralysis took her and dropped her to the floor, her face a mask of betrayal.

"Because this is my village, not yours," said the chilopoda, which was a neat trick, given that it had no voice box, nor any other organ capable of generating complex sounds. "But don't worry. You weren't to know any better, and you have brought me a gift far greater than those *carnes multiformis*. Now, allow me to give you an appropriate reward."

With her poison immunity, it was a matter of seconds before Katie regained the ability to move, but her own kin seemed to have turned against her, swarming her and pinning her to the ground. They dragged her into the biggest building in the village, and then to its centre, where a number of the orange vines grew through the floor, merging into one of the fruiting bodies. She'd seen them outside, too, and had a response from disease nullification about them.

Her kin did not share her resistance skills. They would be vulnerable to it. "A mind control disease?!" she screamed, activating trigger respawn the moment she made the connection. "Damn it. Give me back my kin!"

"Fear not, for you will join them soon enough, and you too will enjoy the bliss of servitude."

The fruit ripped down the centre, releasing a cloud of pestilence that tore straight through Katie's nullification skill. She screamed and struggled to get away, but with almost the full hour before trigger respawn kicked in, and her own allies pinning her to the ground, her actions were limited.

Despite keeping her pinned down, her kin continued to nuzzle into Katie. There were obviously not in any pain. In fact, novice empath was telling her they were happier than she'd ever seen them. If it made all her cute centipedes happy, whatever this thing was couldn't be too bad, could it?

"What is it you want?" asked Katie cautiously.

"All you need do is grow your swarm," came a voice, seemingly emanating from the vines. "As generous as I am, I shall even provide the breeding stock."

All the mystery voice wanted was for her to grow her swarm? But that was what Katie wanted to do anyway. It wouldn't hurt to go along with it for a bit, right?

Her friends released her, and a curious Katie poked her head out of the door, only to see more of the many-armed blobs rolling into the plaza, and *cooperating* as the breeder filled them up with her eggs.

Cooperating! When she'd raided the fox-kin cave in an attempt to stop the arch-mage's attacks, she'd lost more of her kin than she'd been able to replace with her captured prisoners. She'd needed to use her own body to replenish the lost numbers. Having cooperative hosts was amazing. Just how many of her cute centipedes could she produce?

Maybe... she could reach an agreement with this weird vine thing. Even if it did make one of her cute family bite her.

Katie watched on happily as more of the blobs were impregnated, the limiting factor being how fast the breeder could produce her eggs. She'd soon have so many more friends to play with. This was perfect! The only shame was that she'd activated trigger respawn. She wanted to miss as little of this scene as possible, but at least it would only take a moment's effort to fast travel back down here.

The skill activated and sent her back to the catacombs, where she lay in confusion. The past hour seemed strange and blurry in her memories. *Why* had those blobs been willing? And the way her kin had been acting wasn't natural. Right, *mind control!* And she'd been under it too! Made all the more insidious because of the way it hadn't made her do anything she wouldn't have wanted to anyway, and had only hidden the strangeness of the situation from her.

She'd been happy. So had her swarm. Wasn't her family's happiness what was most important? But did it count if it was artificial?

No, creating the swarm was obviously not the end goal. Whatever was responsible for the mind control wanted an army for some reason. They'd already had one, but Katie had handed them a *better* one. Because of course centipedes were the best. Once they had built up the swarm, what then? The normal reason for wanting an army was to fight. They mustn't be allowed to abuse her family like that! But how

was she supposed to rescue them? She would need to find the one responsible for the mind control and kill them.

She once more entered the fourth floor cavern, shifting into her own centipede form, and using her body's natural weapons to speedily sever every vine she came across, far more quickly than she'd have been able to with her sword in her human form. Following the direction of the mana as she went, she soon came to the central cloud of pestilence that shrouded the great angelica arbitrium, the puppet master of all life on the floor.

More of the carnes multiformis surrounded Katie, visible only to her sense vibration skill. "Why do you attack me, when I have only improved the lives of your kind?" they spoke in unison. "But I forgive you, and will allow you, too, to enjoy the bliss of servitude."

Why *had* she been attacking? The voices were right. It really had improved the lives of her friends. They were so happy, as were the blobs that surrounded her. Novice empath was practically screaming at her about how much bliss they were feeling. And she'd been trying to take that away from her kin. She was a bad friend...

No... Katie shook herself, desperately trying to throw off the thoughts that weren't hers, shifting back to her human form as she did so.

"You?" the monsters exclaimed in surprise.

Katie stood stunned and unable to respond, requiring all of her effort to keep thinking through the disease that was invading her mind. It was, alas, a losing battle, as the filaments of plant matter invaded her brain, reworking it to their own ends.

"No... stop..." she cried, this time more aware as her thought processes were subverted and rewritten.

"Relax, my poor, confused child," spoke the monsters. "You are safe here. You will be happy here. Happier than anywhere. After all, good girls will be rewarded."

Katie gasped, her face flushed red beneath its chitinous shell, falling to the ground as her legs trembled and failed to support her weight.

"Do you understand?" asked the monsters.

"Yes... Yes, I'm sorry for attacking you," sobbed Katie. "Please forgive me. Please let me stay here."

"Of course. My wayward child has returned, so how could I not forgive her? But, now that you're back, I do need you to explain. How did you return, when I saw you die? And how do you fight my control so strongly?"

A very thankful Katie was led further through the darkness, coming to a giant tree, where she gushed out her explanations, holding nothing back, desperate to earn the forgiveness and trust of her master. A master which grew increasingly concerned when it learnt of the true nature of the world, and of Katie's quest. And of the fact that she'd activated trigger respawn before entering the haze of seeds that blanketed the area, and had no way of cancelling it.

"You have been a very good girl, so let me give you your reward," spoke the tree, sending Katie into spasms of pleasure. In the mind of the angelica arbitrium, granting such a reward gave the best chance of the respawned Katie returning here of her own free will. Alas for the tree, it had focused its questions on the mechanics of Katie's abilities, and not her personality.

An appropriately apoplectic Katie awoke once more in the catacombs and charged directly into the throne room.

"Oh, wow," said her zombie clone. "What happened to piss you off *this* badly?"

"I'll tell you *after* I've ended its pathetic existence," said Katie. "First, I need that black blight stuff. Lots of it. Canteens full. *Bathtubs* full. An *ocean*. That tree is going to *suffer*."

"Umm... Are you sure you want to blight another floor?"

"It's better than what's there already. Trust me."

The queen of the blight did trust Katie, and so an incredibly angry young woman, armed with the most evil biological weapon ever devised, charged towards the mind-controlling tree. How long could she stay in the cloud without losing her mind? Long enough, she thought, as long as the tree didn't delay her or try to stop her from getting close. She'd just have to pretend to be there of her own will, and keep the blight in her item box. Also, she should activate trigger respawn beforehand, in case her plan went wrong, in which case she could come back and blight the vines instead.

Sense vibration soon informed her that she was surrounded once more, but the tree itself was still far out of range. She still needed to get closer.

"Please, do that to me again. I've never felt anything like it. I promise I'll be good. I haven't activated trigger respawn this time."

Lying her angry little heart out, Katie kept jogging. The puppeteered monsters didn't stop her, and soon the trunk of the tree was once more in sight.

In one fluid motion, Katie pulled a canteen of blight-stuff out of her item box and threw it.

The tree writhed, branches thicker than a bus waving around like twigs in a gale. An inhuman screech seemed to come from every part of it at once. Perhaps it was trying to talk, but if so, it managed nothing coherent. Large lumps started to drop out of the branches as signs of decay sped down the roots.

As for Katie, unwilling to risk either the tree taking her mind or the blight taking her corpse, she took a beetle horn and drove it hard into her eye socket, piercing the brain behind and falling to the floor, dead.

"Well, that was cathartic," she said to herself upon respawn, walking much more sedately to the throne room. It was unfortunate that so many of her kin had been caught up in that. In the best case, the death of the tree would have freed them from its control, and she'd be able to retrieve them. Worst case, they were dead or blighted. It would take weeks of effort to respawn them all, if so. The breeder had been caught too, so she'd need to wait for a new one to develop. At least if they were blighted, her zombie twin could get a bunch of new friends. Despite how they shared literally everything, for some reason the zombie had never found the critters as cute as Katie did.

"What did you just *do*?" asked the zombie queen when Katie entered the throne room.

"Blighted a big, evil, mind-controlling, rapist tree?"

"And then what?"

"What do you mean, and then what? Then I died, on account of not wanting to be mind controlled again."

"So you weren't there? I felt the blight spreading below for a while, and then it all just... went away."

"Went away?"

"Yes. Gone. Re-dead. I didn't even see what did it. One second, the blight was spreading, the next, nothing."

That information caused Katie some alarm. Had the tree managed to cure itself, somehow? She still had a canteen of blight-stuff in reserve, so Katie hurried downstairs to see what was going on.

There was nothing left. The vines were gone, as were the bowls and fruits. The tree had gone, along with the diseased air. The village had gone, with nothing but scoured rock where it had previously stood. The

shrine had gone. There was no sign of any life anywhere on the floor. There was a staircase down, and a couple of destroyed shrines to repair, but as to what happened, Katie could find no clues.

The mystery unresolved, and with the newly spawned carnes multiformis unwelcoming, Katie proceeded down the staircase and began her efforts to tackle floor five, where a veritable fortress stood between her and the way forward. How many of her friends would need to be sacrificed to breach *that* wall? As she crossed the narrow bridge over the lake of lava towards the dangerous-looking demons, who were yelling at her to stop with weapons in hand, she wished she had a class skill that would let her fly around it.

Chapter 37: Side Story: What if? (Shrine Maiden)

Katie approached the remains of the fox-kin village. She'd been intending to search the place for loot; despite the devastation, something might have remained. Maybe in Ja'yakril's house, which had been outside the town walls, and hence hopefully protected. However, despite her intent, she found herself distracted.

The town was crying.

The temple, and the shrine it contained, had been obliterated, yet still the world cried out, weeping for the loss of the divine object that should have stood there. Katie changed direction, and headed towards the previous location of the temple, the pain of the world reflected in the tears of her own eyes.

The previous location of the temple was deserted. Not one crystal brick remained on top of another, and neither was the entrance to the catacombs visible, either buried under rubble or collapsed completely. Nevertheless, Katie didn't require the aid of her map to know where it should stand.

"Accept my offering of mana, and rebuild what was lost," whispered Katie, raising her hands in supplication.

A blue glow formed around her before spreading around the area. The rubble was gently pushed aside and the scorched rock beneath healed, leaving a clean circular area twenty metres across. The shifting rubble revealed the stairway down to the catacombs, still intact, but no blighted husks attempted to exit. A new statue formed in the centre, to which Katie bowed lightly before turning around.

Where she found herself staring straight into the face of a very angry fox-kin.

"Oh, please go away," she moaned. "I've long since had my fill of you."

"You murder more than three thousand people, and expect me to just 'go away'?"

"Not really. I *hope* it, but I know full well it's just wishful thinking."

The fox-kin raised his eyebrows in surprise as he took in Katie's reddened, glistening eyes.

"You were crying? So you do have some shred of remorse for what you did here?"

"Remorse? Not really. It's a pity that so many people died, but given the information I had at the time, I didn't have a better move available to make. Even with hindsight, I still haven't thought of anything else I could have done."

The surprise vanished as the fox-kin's earlier anger returned in full force. "You could have just come quietly!" he hissed.

Now it was Katie's turn to look angry.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for assuming the people kidnapping me—a task which involved poisoning me with sleeping gas, attaching a slave collar around my neck and locking magical bindings around my wrists and ankles—might not be acting with my best interests in mind. Particularly since they came from a species that had previously locked me in a basement while they *tortured* me! And let's not even mention the time

when your guards tried to sell me as some sort of pet."

"And *I'm* sorry for thinking it fair that the person at the centre of what practically became a civil war should be required to give evidence!" the fox-kin snapped back. "We tried asking politely, but you would always run away without even letting us speak."

"As if I could trust any of you people asking me to willingly enter your town. Who knew what sort of trap I could be walking into? I offered to talk to one of your mages upstairs, and he not only flat out refused, but 'answered' by trying to use that knock-out gas on me!"

The fox-kin looked taken aback. "Who? None of the mages reported... Oh, Mo'neeka. He suffered fatal injuries at the claws of a *natatio sideralis* while responding to a reported sighting."

"Could be," answered Katie with a shrug. "He never gave his name. He was alive the last time I saw him, but there was a lot of blood in the corridor, so it wouldn't surprise me if he bled out. Anyway, you still haven't told me what you want. If you're here to enact some sort of revenge for your lost settlement, why are you spending so long talking? Just hurry up and attack already."

"I merely wanted to speak to you while I had the chance, and see for myself what sort of person you were. However much you claim to pity those you murdered, you obviously don't feel you've done anything wrong. You're right; it's time to end this farce. Now, **sleep.**"

The human and the fox-kin stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

"No?" suggested Katie, as the silence dragged on into awkwardness.

"How? The reports indicated your resistance skill was limited. It should only impact the duration of my spell, not its success."

Katie cocked her head as she stared at the fox-kin. "You're *still* lying, aren't you? You aren't here for justice or revenge. You're here *specifically* to prevent me completing my quest. Why? I could understand you wanting revenge, but what has my quest got to do with you?"

"And what makes you think that?"

"Because it wasn't my resistance skills that blocked your spell just now; it was a class skill. Divine mandate. It renders me immune to anyone who moves against me with the motivation of contesting the will of the Goddess."

"*Immune?* That's not... **Sleep. Be still. Perish. Inferno.**"

Katie stepped out of the raging vortex of flame, burnt silk and scorched chitin falling off her.

"Now look what you did! It's going to take me *hours* to repair that. But I've had enough of this. I'm leaving," stated Katie flatly before she turned and walked towards the statue.

"Wait, I'll explain! Please, I beg you, just *listen!*"

"Had you asked *before* blasting me with your magic, I probably would have," muttered Katie, tapping the statue and jumping to the catacombs. "Now, what new skills can I buy with that class level? Anything to help dupliKatie?"

Katie peered into space as she read off her list of skills, settling on one that wouldn't help rescue her zombie twin, but certainly would be handy for her quest. Sense divinity, a skill that would let her detect any divine objects, such as the holy sword, at a large range. The statue lit up like a beacon to her new sense, but nothing else appeared in range.

She jumped to the top floor's shrine and took a look around there instead.

Something other than the statue responded.

A divine object, in the shape of a sword, glowed brightly. It wasn't even far away.

"Don't tell me it was on the first floor all along!" exclaimed Katie out loud in her shock.

The only downside was where, *exactly*, it was. Right next to the humongous presence, bigger than the spider queen, giant centipede and every fox-kin she'd ever met, all rolled into one. The dragon, that had so effortlessly roasted anyone and everything that had ever dared set foot in its corridor.

"Why is the final boss on the first floor!" she complained, still talking to herself.

Still, there was nothing for it. Katie needed to confirm whether the detected item was the holy sword she sought. The shape certainly matched. And so, storing everything in her item box and leaving herself wearing only her nightie, resigning herself to an almost certain roasting, she once more walked towards the dragon.

"Hi," was as far as she got before the dragon torched her.

"Umm..." she hazarded, as her nightie gently fluttered in the warm breeze.

She looked behind her, where the corridor was glowing red, plinking as it cooled and re-solidified.

"You want to stop me getting the holy sword?" she guessed, divine mandate being the only reason she could think of for why she wasn't ash.

The dragon, having barely moved when she first walked into his lair, now gave Katie his full attention. The single, half-closed eye snapped fully open, the second swiftly following it.

"Be gone!" he roared. "You are not wanted here."

The dragon swung a mighty claw, which whistled as it cleaved the air at speeds too fast to see. It crashed into Katie, who unexpectedly was not completely bisected.

"Yeah, you're definitely trying to stop me from getting the sword," she said, her eyes narrowing. "First the fox-kin mage, and now you? What's going on?"

The dragon stepped backward and sat, positioning his vast bulk on top of the sword. "It would be stranger if we *did* agree to cooperate with this insanity of the Goddess," he replied. "Know that you grasping this sword will bring about the end of this world and everyone in it."

That gave Katie pause. She hadn't yet rescued her zombie twin, after all. "And what evidence do you have for that?" she asked.

"None that your tiny mind could comprehend. Now leave this place, and never come back."

"You expect me to take your word for it?" asked Katie, noting the irony of how her situation with the arch-mage was now reversed. He hadn't left when she'd told him to, either.

"Yes. After all, even if you are protected from my attacks, you can't..."

It was at that point, when Katie casually pushed him aside with one hand, that he realised that she *could*.

The dragon roared. Not a roar of panic or anger, but a call. The dragon spoke the Name of his brother. "Stop her!" he added.

Katie staggered, blood pouring from her ears and nose. Her eyes ruptured. She could still detect the holy sword, burning brightly to her newest sense, so she ran towards it even as the shadows rose up around the cavern. The air chilled around her, and her breathing became laboured. The darkness thickened, leaving her feeling as if she was wading through mud. Her mind was assailed by incomprehensible whispers. Even her esoteric senses screamed about presences all around her, so close that she could reach out and touch them, and yet thin, as if they were not quite there. She shut off the skills, concentrating only on

sense divine.

She grasped the sword.

The world shattered.

Katie shivered in the darkness and the silence. Her esoteric senses were dead, no mana or presences around her. Even sense divine no longer picked up the sword she still held in her hand. If not for the feel of it, she would have no idea it was there.

No, it wasn't silence. The whispers were still there, growing in volume and driving needles into her mind. Likewise, she could perceive shadows all around her, reaching out, grasping at her. Katie screamed, thrashing around at the perceived threats, but her holy sword striking nothing.

Fighting to act with some measure of rationality, Katie considered her situation. She'd been hit with... something. An attack? It had destroyed her senses and left her hallucinating, barely able to keep hold of her sanity. She needed to clear it with a respawn. Taking the sword to her own throat, she sliced it open, never noticing the health bar she had grown so used to ignoring at the bottom of her vision was no longer there. Neither did item box respond when she tried to store the sword, managing to make the attempt despite the unexpectedly high amount of pain.

Katie fell to the floor, dead, never having heard the panicked shouts of the mage that had first summoned her, or the knights pounding against the barrier. Her grip on the sword lost, it fell off the dais and out of the barrier, permitting the mage to retrieve it, but her corpse remained ensconced within.

There were no more respawns. With the aid of the sword, the demon invasion was thwarted, but where once the holy sword lay on an altar, now a broken corpse lay on blood-stained carpet, its face frozen in a rictus of horror. The king ordered the room sealed off, with none understanding what had happened there.

Afterword

And so ends part two of this fetch quest, in a way that's going to leave part three rather poorly named. No longer is it a fetch quest, but now she's building an alliance with one set of demons in order to fight another set. There's some amount of incongruity there, but at least she's acknowledged the need to check if the other world's demons actually are evil before mindlessly slaughtering them all.

There's another interesting what-if here. Last time, I speculated what would happen if Katie had let Ja'yakril collar her, and suggested it wouldn't have ended well for her. But, as Mru'walyn's story made clear, he initially wanted to convince Katie of his position through peaceful discourse, and it was only after her blighted attack destroyed their settlement that he was pushed onto the warpath.

Even after first contact had ended badly, had So'layn not tried to steal Katie's immortality to solve his existential dread at the apparent lack of an afterlife, there would still have been a chance.

Of course, had Katie not listened, things would still have ended badly. If the discussion took place before the creation of her zombie twin, she may well have rejected the arch-mage, disbelieving his claims. It was the presence of someone in the world she actually cared about that pushed her into playing safe and giving up on the sword, and it was unlikely she'd have grown sufficiently attached to any of the fox-kin in a short time. Perhaps if the arch-mage had brought some fluffy-tailed kids with him to that conversation, everyone could have had a happy ending. Perhaps I'll write that what-if for part 3.

As for the what-if's that I did write, blighted champion ended as badly as could be expected. The class was obviously a death sentence, and Katie would have required extreme levels of foolishness to select it. Chilopoda kin was a slight improvement, but having reached the abyss without jeopardising her quest means the black dragon, and hence the demons, are rather less friendly than on the canonical path.

Shrine maiden was the technically correct way to go, which is of course the *worst* kind of correct. If the

class description had listed 'makes you invincible to anyone who wants to stop you getting the holy sword' and 'tells you where the holy sword is' up front, even the canonical Katie would have picked it. She was fortunate that it didn't. Although, that story does raise a serious issue with her plan to escape the world without the sword and use her newfound powers to stem the demon invasion herself.

The bondage aficionado class? Nope, I think I've milked that joke for all it was worth without adding an entire side story about it. If you ever get eaten by a hydra and your first response is to compare the softness of its throat to a spider silk cocoon, please seek counselling. Actually, first call animal control, because there's a *hydra* on the loose. But once you've done that, definitely seek counselling.

Thanks for reading, and (hopefully) see you again for A (Not So) Simple Fetch Quest, Part 3: Demons.