

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Liz took another half hour to finish harvesting the fruit. Thankfully, nothing else interfered. She carefully moved downstream a few meters and planted one, the dirt parting with a gesture. Green and brown Mana flowed from her hands into the fruit and ground around it. A few seconds later, a tiny sprout of the vine popped out of the ground, the fruit shrinking as the nutrients in it went to support the hastened growth. After five minutes of growing, the new plant was a third the size of the first one. Liz shook her head, whatever trance she'd been under fading away.

"Okay," she said. "It'll be a year before we can harvest these again, but there should be six that time. I, uh, think we won't be able to increase the harvest by more than a plant or two a year, though. Just vague feelings based upon that, oh, new Skill. Nature's Focus, it subsumed my Examine Skill and lets me know more about plants now. Also, can occasionally cause a focused trance where I can harvest plants well above my Herbology Skill level. Which is good, because this was supposed to take a Journeyman or higher to successfully get." She held out the two fruits proudly.

"Great job!" Colin said. "So, what are they?"

"All that Nature's Focus tells me is that it's called Nature Essence Underwater Fruit. Maybe we should think of a name?" She said while swimming towards the far shore. "But the description says it'll give me one hundred Essence and an Advanced Plant Essence for each of them."

"Sounds perfect," David said. "We'll make some time soon so you can eat them."

"Needs to be sooner rather than later," she replied. "They won't go into my storage space and the Essence will start bleeding off soon."

"Then as soon as we hit the forest," David said, putting on a bit more speed. They zoomed across the rest of the river, easily beating any Olympian's hundred-meter swim time.

Liz pointed out a few more interesting plants, but nothing anywhere near as strong as the fruits she was holding. "I guess we'll get a lot of diving time in," she said. "Since these suits seem to be perfect for it."

"Might be fun to see how coral changed someday," Aly said. "I always wanted to dive the Great Barrier Reef sometime."

"Hey! Just got the Swimming Skill," Liz said.

David noticed the little blinking light in his vision, and when he opened it up, he saw that he had as well. "Only Novice 2 though," David laughed. "I never was that good at Swimming."

They ended up swimming about fifty meters downstream to find an easy egress point from the water. There the cliffs that'd formed with the change in the world eased downward into a gentler slope, and they were able to scramble up the rock without difficulty. They moved quickly into the forest. "This undergrowth is crazy!" Aly said. "It wasn't like this even a few days ago, and normal Colorado forest undergrowth would never have gotten this thick."

"At least we can ignore the thorns and scratchy branches," Colin said, forcing his way through yet another set of bushes. "Honey, where do you want to stop?"

"Over there is a small clearing," Liz pointed to the north.

A large tree had been felled in the storm, leaving an opening through the canopy that let light fall in. A significant proportion of the ground cover was damaged, and the tree itself had

several useful spots to sit on. Liz popped onto the tree while Aly vanished into Stealth. David and Colin moved a bit away from Liz and looked around. "This feels more like something we'd see in the southeast or pacific northwest," Colin said, gesturing at the thick undergrowth.

"I don't recognize many of these plants," David said. "And, I mean, that one is yarrow, but why is it two meters tall. They normally only grow like knee height. Those flowers look like sulfur flowers, but they are a bright blue, not yellow. So not only did a prehistoric creature thing show up, but new plants are growing, beyond the obviously magical Essence ones."

"Yup," Colin said. "Good thing we got druids. Maybe Liz or Summer could identify these plants. If not, well, just gotta experiment I guess."

David looked over at Liz, who had taken a few bites from the larger of the two fruits. "I'm going to cultivate until Liz is done. Can you and Aly watch over us?" Colin nodded and Aly gave an affirmative over the comm system. David sat against the side of the fallen pine, nestled between two branches. With a thought, his consciousness moved into his core cave.

"Alright, I had an idea that might work out," David said to himself. He directed a flow of Energy and Mana out of his cores, taking chunks of fifty each and sending them soaring through his channels. Each chunk ground itself down quickly, but seemed to prepare the way for the next one. His Mana and Energy drained slowly, his regeneration almost enough to keep up with the prodigious speed he was spending it.

Using fewer resources in a cycle made it take longer and cost more, with almost two thousand Mana and Energy flowing through his channels. However, the strain he'd felt before was noticeably lessened, and he was able to generate almost two and a half Essence, showing a marked improvement in efficiency.

David popped out of his core cave to see Colin moving towards him. "Good timing," Colin said. "Liz just finished up. Aly said she hasn't spotted anything bigger than a rabbit in a half a kilometer."

"Awesome. We should get a move on, talk while walking," David said, hopping to his feet.

"I was able to upgrade Hasten Growth with Plant Essence," Liz said to them all. "It improved the modifiers, now I can use a tiny amount of Mana to massively improve growth speed of a single plant, or a moderate amount of Mana to moderately improve growth speed for a huge area. The Mana dropped, single plant growth went up at least two levels, and the area increased by one."

"That's awesome," David said. "Hopefully a huge area covers a whole Farm. What did the second one do?"

"I tried to put it into my Nature's Grace Skill to see if it would improve the healing somehow," Liz said. "But I lost control. It merged into the Herbology Skill, and lets me use Mana to explore a plant's effects. So I should be able to start figuring out what the new plants do, but its not an increase to my effectiveness in a fight."

"Long term, much better," David said. "Hopefully we'll get through without a major fight."

"Dude, really? You just said that?" Colin exclaimed.

David sighed, resisting the urge to faceplant, "Sorry. Let's pick up the pace a bit."

They jogged, pushing through bushes and dodging around trees for another twenty minutes before stumbling across a thin game trail leading only slightly west of their current

direction. Aly slipped onto it, and the others followed. She increased her pace, slipping into a Sprint for twenty seconds before slowing to a fast Run.

David copied her, focusing on maximizing Energy efficiency. *Huh, the Sprint/Run combo she has is only very mildly draining on my Energy. Sprint drains it quickly, but it shoots back up while only Running, even with the very minor amount the Beginner level of that Skill uses. My wife is amazing, figuring this out so quickly. I love her.*

They continued for an hour, the trail not completely straight but close enough that they made better time on it than they would have in the forest.

Aly suddenly stopped. David caught up to her, and then heard what she did. Baying and barking hounds, deeper than normal and with an undertone of wrongness. "Wargs, hunting something," she said.

"Then let us give them a new target," David said.

She nodded sharply, then all four of them broke into a Sprint. Thirty seconds later, they ran into a clearing. Fifteen Wargs that stood to the middle of David's belly, larger than the ones they'd fought before, and one that was as tall as Colin. The massive beast looked like parts of its skin were rotting away. The Daemon wolves growled in a semi-circle around an utterly massive elk.

Name: Elder Mountain Elk Level: 8 Aspect: Mountain, Lightning

Name: Warg Alpha Level: 7 Aspect: Decay

Level eight on the Elk!? David thought when triggering Scholar's Vision on the two largest animals. And Lightning Essence?

Just as he thought that, sparks formed between the majestic equine's antlers, and a blast of lightning zapped one of the Wargs. This seemed to be a signal to start, as the rest of them darted around the animal, seeking to distract and hamstring it. It slashed sideways, making two Wargs leap backward, then kicked to the side, crushing another Wargs chest and sending it sprawling.

Another Warg used the distraction to lunge inward, mouth shooting towards the planted rear leg of the elk, but Liz joined in the battle. A spear of wood shot out of the ground, stabbing straight into the attacking beast's throat.

David summoned his sword and shield, Sprinting towards the Alpha. Twenty steps away, he triggered Vanguard's Charge. The Alpha chose that moment to leap forward, tangling with the Elk, only to hop backward away from an antler swipe. The Elk stomped and chunks of rock shot upward, knocking a few Wargs about.

The Alpha's leap took it just outside the target of David's Charge, but he was able to redirect slightly. His shield slammed into the large mutated wolf's rear end. It sprawled away

from him, rolling on the ground and struggling to its feet. The beast's closest leg was broken and bleeding, but in the second that David watched the bleeding stopped.

"Tough guy, aren't you?" David taunted, waving his sword at the Alpha. It snarled, then opened its mouth even wider. A tingle of danger caused David to hunker down behind his shield, meeting a beam of grayish-green energy with its surface. The Mana in the shield decayed away, and he frantically reinforced it, layering Earth and pure Mana to deflect the beam towards the ground. It ate through the pure Mana slightly faster, and he quickly shuffled to the side. The Alpha's attack sank into the ground, turning the dirt it hit into something like ashes that quickly vanished into nothingness.

Note to self, don't get hit by that, David gulped, then responded with a quickly formed Mana Bolt. The Bolt slammed into the Warg's vulnerable snout, causing it to yip in pain. Another Warg leaped at him, and David used a Swordsman's Step followed by a Vanguard's Strike, slashing through the Daemon's throat. Its claws raked his shoulder, though, splitting his armor and scoring his skin. It hurt, but only as bad as a paper cut. Pain Resistance put even that tiny bit as unimportant, letting him ignore the injury and focus on the Alpha.

The giant Warg rushed him, its teeth and claws glowing the same nauseating color as its beam. David braced, activating Earthen Bulwark and Strengthen together. "Come on!" David Shouted, mentally tagging the Elk as a friendly. The Mana and Energy wave washed over the massive animal, and it looked over at David in surprise. He nodded at it, not taking his eyes off the Warg.

The Alpha set to pounce, and David lifted his shield slightly. The beast didn't leap, instead slashing a front paw at him. A crescent of Decay shot out and slammed into his shins. The majority of the damage was blunted by the Mana Shield he'd reflexively cast and his armor, but it was everything he could do to not immediately collapse as he felt his calf muscles dissolve. Waves of agony and relief rolled through him as he directed Advanced Bodily Repair towards it. He didn't have the time or mental capacity to control the resources headed towards it, but the improvement his Skill had developed made it so that he could still stay standing.

The Alpha growled in annoyance, only to take another Mana Bolt to the face. It roared, bounding towards David again. The beast slammed into his shield, and David held for a second before he felt his Bulwark Skill shatter under the massive force of the horse-sized wolf's shoulder. David stumbled away, his shield dropping to block the follow-up claw attack. The force still transferred through, sending him staggering.

Even as he was sent backward, he stabbed over his shield, pinching his blade downwards. The combined Power Attack and Vanguard's Strike cut through the attacking paw, shearing it off completely. A glance at his Mana, though, let him know he was below half. In the back of his mind he followed the rest of the fight, the Elk and his friends ripping into the Warg pack while he kept the most dangerous opponent occupied.

The Warg howled, a blast of Energy sapping David's Energy, stamina, and weakening him. He increased the flow of Energy into his Strengthen Skill, supercharging it. It doubled the cost, but negated the beast's Skill. In response, David Charged forward, smashing his shield into the Alpha's snout. A snap echoed out as its jaw broke, the wave of Energy forcing it too wide. Blood poured out of the creature's mouth. The gush was enhanced when a stab put his sword into its throat.

It stumbled backward, whining in pain, and then a bolt of lightning shot into the Alpha's side. It froze up, muscles seizing as the massive current flowed into it. David took the chance, dashing forward and throwing a massive amount of Mana and Energy into a combined Power Attack, Vanguard's Strike that slashed through the beast's head. His blade skittered off the Alpha's skull, but it ripped out its eye and finished cutting off the bottom of its snout.

David turned the slash into a stab, burying his sword in its throat. It thrashed in agony, its claws ripping into David's left thigh. He fell, his sword dragging downward as he did, slicing through its ribs and cutting apart its heart. The Decay Energy fought him, destroying the muscles, bone, and blood vessels around his hip. He dropped into his center, knowing that the beast was dead, and followed the Mana and Energy flowing into Advanced Bodily Repair as he tried to stop the rampaging attack from causing him to bleed out.

Metal Mana was degraded almost instantly, turning a rust red color. *Well, that makes sense*, David thought. *Metal turns into rust. I guess my visualization of Metal Mana was iron or steel. You know, since the color was silver. I wonder if someone else's Metal could be copper or bronze in color. Maybe even gold. What would gold Mana do? Are there any metals that are associated with healing or recovery? Maybe silver? Could I change the type of my metal to be silver?*

He focused, sending a wave of Earth Mana with an equal amount of Energy while he concentrated on a chunk of fifty Metal Mana. It was the color of stainless steel. *Alright, silver, what do I know about silver?* He thought about the necklace he'd gotten from Aly when they were dating. The slick smoothness of the chains, the chill when he first put it on. He thought about how it barely seemed to ever need cleaning, and even then it was just a bit duller.

It took a while, how long he wasn't sure, but the quadrupling of time inside his core cave from Inscribing Scholar's Insight kept his injuries from spiraling out of control while his mind was elsewhere. Finally, the Metal Mana he'd separated got shinier, a purer silver color, and he sent it with fifty Energy.

The Silver Mana resisted the corrosion of the Decay, beating back the advancing wave of destruction that was the entirety of his thigh and hip. He kept pushing, using a sliver of Silver to aspect more of his Mana. Pure Mana resisted the corruption as well, and the mixture of Silver, Pure, and Energy let him fix the major arteries that had been damaged.

Rather than working from the top down, he focused on his cardiovascular system, trying to prevent the loss of any more blood. His Hit Points had dropped precipitously while he was bleeding, only his massive pool keeping him alive. The drop became significantly more gradual once the arteries were closed up. He still had almost nine hundred Hit Points, but that left him below a third of his total pool. The Decay was still damaging him, and he started to push his Mana into restoring his tendons and muscles.

A surge of green Mana flowed into him suddenly. The first bit Decayed into a brownish sludge color. The second rank of Mana, though, absorbed the Decayed Nature Mana and glowed brighter, beating back the invasive Mana. It gradually turned into the same sludge, but that only strengthened the Mana continuing to enter him.

David redoubled his efforts, moving to meet the healing Skill that he was sure was from Liz. Together, both Skills swept the damaging Mana out of his body, and quickly restored him to mobility. A glance at his Status showed David was still down nearly a thousand Hit Points once Liz's Skill stopped sending in anything, but he just shrugged and came out of his core cave.

Liz's face was the first thing he saw, looking at him worriedly through the clear glass-like substance of her faceplate. "You okay now?" She asked.

David sat up gingerly. His hip twinged at that, not happy with him, but not too damaged to let him get seated. "Mostly. Still hurting, and I need over a thousand Hit Points to hit full. How's everyone?"

"Colin and Aly took some cuts, but we're all fine now. The Elk, well, he won't let me heal him," Liz glared off to the side, where the massive animal was calmly munching on grass right next to the corpse of the Alpha. At his glance, the beast huffed at him, then kicked the body.

"I think it wants us to loot the bodies first," David laughed, then reached over and looted the Alpha. It shimmered and vanished into Essence, leaving David up two hundred credits, one hundred Essence, and an Essence stone of a dingy gray crystal plopped to the ground. David looked at his notifications.

Congratulations! You have looted a Warg Alpha, level 7!
You receive 200 credits, 100 Essence, and a Minor Essence of Decay!

"Decay Essence," he said. "I don't want it. Liz, probably best for you. Maybe it'll help your plant growth Skill or something? Decay seemed to really help your Nature Mana." He described what he'd noticed when deep in his Inscribing Scholar's Focus Skill.

"Sure," she said with a frown. "I guess we'll see."

"Did we get any other Essences?" David asked, but everyone shook their heads.

He checked his Status, and saw he had gained eight hundred and fifty Essence. His Skill gain was similarly large. He grimaced at the huge list, then mentally forced the display to condense the level ups into a single message

Congratulations! Through usage and learning, your Skills have grown!
Hiking is now Beginner 4
Running is now Beginner 6
Scholar's Vision is now Beginner 1
Sneak is now Initiate 5
Sword Mastery is now Beginner 15
Shield Mastery is now Beginner 17
Vanguard's Charge is now Beginner 17
Pain Resistance is now Beginner 8
Vanguards Strike is now Beginner 5
Strengthen is now Beginner 5
Sprint is now Beginner 6
Omnicaster is now Beginner 18
Swordsman's Step is now Beginner 5
Earthen Bulwark is now Beginner 1
Mana Shield is now Beginner 1
Inscribing Scholar's Focus is now Beginner 12
A Lord's Presence is now Beginner 5
Lead from the Front is now Initiate 13
Combat Reflexes is now Beginner 10

Advanced Bodily Repair is now Beginner 8 Earth's Unrelenting Motion is now Beginner 6 Minor Muscle Efficiency is now Initiate 12
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That was so much easier to wade through. Woo, thirty more Essence. Not that that matters much. Of course, now that I thought that, I'll be five below leveling for a week or something. "Well, that was profitable," David said amusedly. He struggled to his feet, then turned to the Elk. "I am glad we were able to help you." He bowed slightly to it. "Please let my friend tend to your wounds, and then we will leave."

It huffed at him, but stood still when Liz approached. She extended her hands, and a deep green glow enveloped the huge animal. A minute later, all of its bleeding injuries had closed. The Elk batted her side with its head, and she lightly patted it between the antlers. A giant tongue licked her helmet, then the animal ponderously turned and pounded off into the woods.

In its place, though, another crystal sparkled. Liz picked it up, "Advanced Lightning Essence. Colin, here," she said and tossed it to her husband.

David nodded, knowing that his friends had received less Essence's than he had up to this point. "Both of you absorb the Essences and then we'll get a move on."

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Once finished, they continued to move along the game trail they'd been following, still heading north by northeast. David thought they'd covered another kilometer from the battle site when a loud huff sounded from beside him. He looked to the side and leaped backward in fear when a huge antler swung near him. Only after he jumped and screamed did he realize it was the Elk again. "I swear, you're making fun of me," he said crossly to the giant animal. "I can see the amusement in your eyes."

It huffed at him again, then turned and walked slowly away. After ten steps, when it was just barely visible through the foliage, its head turned back towards them and let out a chuffing sound.

"I think he wants us to follow him," Liz said.

The Elk nodded his head slowly, then turned and sauntered off. Liz walked after it first, and the rest of the group hurried after her. Quickly, the walk turned into a jog and then into a run. The underbrush was easily ignored, and the Elk moved slowly enough that they could keep up. *I'm not sure we could stay with him if he wanted to escape us, David thought. Hunting high level animals is going to be a pain. Even out-leveling him I'm sure he's got a higher Strength, Agility, and Con than either Colin or I do. Of course, we've probably got a huge lead on him in Intelligence and Wisdom. At least I hope we do, or humans are going to go even lower on the food chain. Eh, we'll survive and thrive, just like we did in the caveman days.*

The trip through the woods continued at a breakneck pace for nearly thirty minutes, leaving David confused as to how far they'd traveled. "Six and a half kilometers or so," Aly said. "Scout's Instincts isn't too precise beyond that, at least at its level."

The Elk slowed, and three others, a female and two calves, stepped out of the trees onto a game trail they'd entered a kilometer or so away. More elk were barely visible, maybe thirty all told. "Aww, you wanted us to meet your family," Liz cooed.

The youngest elk, which David inspected as a level three Juvenile Mountain Elk, turned towards them, and Aly gasped. "He's injured," she said. "Liz!"

Liz stepped forward calmly, "Hey there little guy. Can I help you like I did your papa?"

The little elk bleated, then stumbled forward. She gently caught it, and the green glow of her Mana surrounded it.

David looked at the young animal, then frowned. "That looks like burns from Corruption," he said.

"It is. Now hush, I need to concentrate," Liz scolded him. Slowly, the juvenile's cracked and bleeding skin sealed up and scabs formed. Seconds later, the scabs fell off to reveal healthy skin underneath. "There, all better now."

"Is that why you sought us out?" David asked. "To heal your child, or do you want help with the Corruption?"

The Elder Mountain Elk leaned down and licked his kid, then turned to look up the trail. Lightning flashed among his horns, then faded. He looked back at them.

David nodded. "Lead on then. We will see what we can do."

With a nod and a huff, the Elder Elk turned and bound down the trail. Aly Sprinted after him. David shook his head, but Sprinted after her as well. The elk in the trees leaped over brush, their passage oddly quiet for such huge animals. The movement to either side of him let

David realize that he'd underestimated the number of animals in the herd. At least fifty were rushing in the same direction, while a couple waited with the juveniles and babies.

They ran for another kilometer, before the trees gave way to a farm. One of the massive watering circle things, David had no idea what they were called, sat rusting and fading over where the crops would have gone in a few months, had the world not ended. Instead, the center was full of Corruption and a hundred Wargs. Two Alphas and one even larger Daemon dog stood court over their minions, only to turn surprised at the dozens of massive elk that trampled through the knee-high grass surrounding the edges of the circle.

"Crush them down!" David Shouted, summoning his sword and shield. David fought with his Skill, forcing it to target the animals surrounding him along with his party.

Colin bellowed, only to be drowned out by the bugles of the animals. There were at least twenty male elks who ducked their heads down, lightning flaring between their massive antlers. The Elder Elk who David had helped out had the largest rack, his level increasing from the fight with the Alpha.

A wave of electricity shot out of the group, engulfing the front-most Wargs. They were sent tumbling backward, writhing and howling in agony. The Alphas responded, two beams of Decay shooting out.

David shot forward, urging everything he could into Vanguard's Charge, Sprint, and Strengthen. A wave of Energy shot out of him when he slammed to a stop in front of the Elder Elk, smashing into one of the beams and disrupting the attack. The other beam annihilated one of the other male elks, his body dissolving into stinky, black goo in seconds.

Liz and Aly retaliated with long range attacks of their own. A surge of vines shot out of the ground, surrounding four Wargs and crushing them to the ground. Aly threw a spear of Shadow Mana that zipped into the still open mouth of an Alpha, causing it to fall backward with a strangled yelp.

More lightning fell among the Wargs, who rushed forward. They were met with a wall of bodies, trampling and impaling them. They didn't go down alone, though, as the Wargs bit and clawed at legs and bodies. The Corruption they were running on tried to tangle them up as well, burning and swiping at ankles and knees. David vaguely saw an elk collapse under the assault, screaming in agony as the Corruption ripped into it.

He had his own problems. Trying to surge through the Wargs was a lot harder than when he had done that with the Gremlins. He kept his eyes on the Alphas, ready to intercept another attack. Liz and Aly were focusing on them as well, sending Mana Grenades and their other Skills at them to prevent the attacks. Colin laid about him, his halberd having been turned back into his arm blades as he bashed his way through the horde.

The Wargs quickly learned the elk were the less dangerous of the two groups, and tried to shy away from the two blue and silver covered humans. David and Colin didn't let them, surging forward with the space given to slice through the dangerous beasts as quickly as they could.

The first phase of the fight lasted all of thirty seconds before the Wargs were overrun. In the forest, surrounding a single elk or even the entire herd, with warning and stealth the Wargs would have overcome the herbivores. In the open, caught off guard by an all out charge left nearly a hundred trampled and almost unrecognizable bodies smashed into the Corruption.

The two Alphas and the larger one, leaped over the line of elk before turning and blasting three more. David used Scholar's Vision on the larger one.

Name: Warg Lord Level: 9 Aspect: Decay, Death

"I've got the big one. Colin, Liz, Aly, take the one on the right!" David shouted, "Let's GO!" He slammed forward, Vanguard's Charge powering his movement while he soaked Mana Shield in Earth Mana and filled the edge of his sword with silver aspected Metal Mana.

The Daemon did something, black energy coating its paw as it swiped at David's incoming shield. A wave of death flowed out from the Warg's claws.

David hunched behind his shield, reinforcing it as best he could, then he slashed forward with Vanguard's Strike, hoping to break apart the attack. *Break apart*, he thought, then cast Spike Field in front of him. The spikes broke out of the ground, only to be dissolved into nothingness by the Warg's Skill, but it diminished all the same. The cut of Vanguard's Strike, going straight through David's shield, lessened the wave as well, and then it was upon him. His shield was wiped away, then his Mana Shield absorbed the impact and shattered.

Each successive Skill, though, reduced the strength of the Warg's strike such that when it broke through his Mana Shield, what was left was unable to penetrate his armor. He was only a few steps from the enemy, moving too fast to remake his shield. Instead, he tucked his shoulder, letting the momentum transfer through his body while pushing Energy into Strengthen to protect himself.

The Warg, a beast taller than David, collapsed backward, its chest crumpling inward around David's shoulder, and then was blasted off its feet by the wave of Energy his Skill produced. He hurriedly reformed his sword and shield, but he needn't have rushed. The Daemon was lying crumpled on the ground, having traded the unnatural durability of the Warg Alphas for a massive increase in offensive power.

David looked to the side to see Colin, Liz, and Aly were beating on one of the Alpha's, and the elk had started blasting away at the other. He moved forward to finish off the Lord, when it spoke. "I still win," it gargled out. "Your world is doomed, like all the rest."

"We'll see about that," David said, raising his sword. He paused at the top, the beast somehow looking pleased, then glanced backward to see what the Daemon was looking at. A new portal had formed, swelling in size with each Warg or elk that died. Something was behind it, distorting the plane of shimmering light. He turned quickly back to the injured enemy. He stabbed down, slicing through its front legs, then he kicked its head until the creature was pointed away from the fight. "I'll just kill you later, then."

He ran towards Colin, who was on the back of the Alpha they were fighting. "Don't kill it!" David screamed out. "Just cripple. They're summoning something!"

Colin bellowed a war cry, then stabbed down with his blades. He checked his movement, though, and hit between its shoulder blades rather than decapitate it completely. It stumbled, the rearmost legs flopping as the nerves were cut. The Alpha then collapsed to the ground, its remaining legs pulled out from under it by a whip of Shadow Mana and a vine. It lay there, mewling pitifully.

The elk didn't stop attacking, even when two more of them died to a beam and a claw. The Elder Elk slammed into its side with his antlers down, ripping through the Daemon's side. Lightning sparked between the visible tines, causing the Warg to spasm, and then two more elk kicked its skull hard enough to crush it while it was defenseless.

David turned to the portal and saw the surface clear some and grow another meter in diameter, but whatever it was that was trying to get through was unable to. "Elder," David called, "get your herd to leave the Corruption." He then ran towards the portal. In the corner of his eyes, he noticed Aly rushing towards him as well.

"We need to close it!" she said, and he nodded. He continued to ignore the attempts by the Corruption to claw through his ankles, forcibly ripping any attempt at tripping him out of the ground. They reached the portal, and he touched it.

Type: Large Greater Portal (Forming)

Description: A forming greater portal to the Daemon Realms. Large in size, it can only allow Behemoth or smaller Daemons through. Extremely dangerous, may break limiters on Daemon levels within a large distance.

Closure required: 1,000,000 Mana or Energy.

Essence required for stabilization: 400

Mana or Energy input will increase Essence required for stabilization.

David checked and saw he still had a bit over a thousand of each resource, so he immediately dumped everything he had. The Essence required increased by ten, and then jumped another ten when Aly touched the portal.

"This is going to take a while, and if that big guy bleeds out it'll open," Aly said. She stabbed her spear into the ground, creating a tiny pocket of greenish moss out of the Corruption.

David mimicked her, making the area just large enough for one person to sit down on.

"I'm going to get Liz to tie up and heal the big one," Aly said, "and I'll try and keep the Alpha alive. You and Colin focus on closing this, or at least increasing the Essence required so we can kill one of the Daemons."

"Good idea," David said, dropping onto the ground. Aly patted his head, then Sprinted off to Liz and Colin, pulling a bandage out of her storage item. David looked around again, and saw the elk were blasting the Corruption from outside it. He tried to figure out how long it would take them to get to triggering its defense mode, but couldn't narrow it down to less than a couple of hours. *Okay, meditate to speed up regen, fill cores most of the way, dump into portal, repeat. Use the time to go over my attacks.*

He fell into his cores, pulling more Mana and Energy into his body with his Skill. On a whim, he moved his focus to his skin, trying to see if he could figure out where it came from. *I can't sense anything outside of me*, he thought. *It's almost like the Mana just appears on my skin, then it's sucked into my core. But where does it come from?* He pounded his viewpoint against the boundaries of his body, but didn't get anywhere. After a subjective minute, he stopped. *Try it later, when I've got more time. For now, I can just focus on other Skills. I wish the sparring in the Arena was as effective as a real fight. Only the first time really did anything significant for my Skills.*

His consciousness moved back to his core, settling into the little office that Inscribing had added to it, and he brought up a viewpoint of his charge at the Warg Lord. David focused on the interplay of his Mana Shield and the attack, watching it break over and over again. *Maybe I can move the Mana around? Could I have focused it against the attack and then spread it back out again?*

Twenty minutes of subjective time later, he realized he was full. "Oops," he shook his head and came out of his core cave. It took him only fifteen seconds to drain his resources again, noticing Colin was sitting on a similarly cleared patch of ground. A quick check showed almost five hundred Essence was required to stabilize. The top of the portal, nearly six meters over his head, was bulging outward, the Daemon on the other side trying to rip its way through.

Suddenly, the required Essence dropped by two hundred. David looked over but both the Warg Alpha and Warg Lord were still breathing. The Corruption had been reduced in a crescent where the twenty surviving elk were pelting it. "The portal got Essence somehow, but I don't see anything that could have caused it," he said.

Colin opened his eyes and emptied his pools into the portal. "Could be from the other side. Guess we should hurry up."

David nodded jerkily, then jumped back into his core. This time, he only focused on recharging, not letting his Skills distract him. It took just over thirteen minutes of subjective time to reach full, and he popped back out and emptied his Mana and Energy into the portal. After the seventh time, his channels were starting to feel strained. He diverted some attention to Advanced Bodily Repair, giving up a bit of his regeneration to try and heal them. It worked somewhat, not bringing them back to a pain free state but reducing how quickly they decayed at least.

The twentieth time he paused to inspect the portal. "Six hundred fifty Essence," he said. "We're making progress."

"Yeah, but I'm not going to be able to continue much longer. Is the dispersal amount changing?" Colin asked.

"Yeah, it's gone down with every bit of Mana or Energy we put in. We need the other two. Do we risk it?" David asked.

"Aly first," Colin said.

"Shadow, kill it and come help," David said through the communication system. He pulled up his Status to see what he could potentially do. *Twenty five hundred Essence, so I got twelve hundred so far. I wonder what the Alpha Lord will give us. Options, what are my options? I can buff Con or Wis to increase regen speed. I don't have enough to level. I've got enough Ways, so I guess just an even split between my regen stats. Ouch, two hundred Essence each stat. Not much benefit. Back to the grind.*

Twenty minutes later, Liz stood nearby. "It's stable but weak, and tied up with dozens of vines. We should be safe enough for me to join in."

Not five minutes later, a surge of Essence flew into David, and he looked over to see the elk had reached the Warg Lord and squashed it. The portal flared into life, and he looked up in panic.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The portal was smaller than it had been, but still nearly five meters in diameter. Through the suddenly clear surface, a massive Daemon beast was visible. It barely looked like it could fit through the portal, making David feel small and insignificant. Its face was covered in tentacles, looking kind of like an Illithid from D&D, but undead. The visible parts of its body were peppered with pustules and rotting flesh, and a smell that made him want to vomit floated out of the Daemon Realms.

A massive arm pushed up against the portal, but there was still a clear film that prevented it from getting through. "Elk, lightning on the portal!" David screamed, then shoved every drop of Mana he had into it. Energy followed, then he tried to sink into his core to meditate. His channels hurt, reaching a point where continuing would cause damage, but he refused to stop until he was completely empty. *Don't panic. It can't get through. I hope.* Quiet thunder crackled over his head. *The elk are helping. We got this. Just relax, meditate to fill up quickly, and we can beat it.*

He opened his eyes a few minutes later, ready to drop more Energy into the portal, when the beast screamed. It shrank, diminishing before their eyes to only three meters tall. All the Corruption around the portal flowed into it, vanishing as if the Corruption had never existed. It backed off the portal, then leaped through it. This time, the film parted, and David scanned it quickly as he leaped to the side.

Type: Daemon Harvester Level: 10 Aspects: Unknown (Skill level limited)

The Daemon was the unholy mixture of a gorilla, a bug, and an octopus, that all died a few weeks ago. It had patches of chitin covering its back and legs, thick fur, and short stubby back legs. It bellowed in agony as it landed, the Elder Mountain Elk having created a spike field right under it.

David copied the cervidae, wincing as the Mana for a Spike Field flowed through his outstretched arm. *Not sure how much I can do*, he thought, then summoned his sword and shield.

The beast smashed through the stone spikes, then hooted as it shambled after the elk. They split apart, circling the Corruption and fleeing the Daemon. The Harvester turned towards the right, then blurred forward in a leap. It crushed an elk, then ripped off its head. The tentacles surrounding its mouth buried themselves into the animal's skull and pulsed as they sucked its brain out.

"It's a zombie!" Colin cried out, forming his halberd. He Sprinted and then used Berserker's Leap, a Skill that propelled him through the air almost as fast as David's Vanguard's Charge. It was supposed to be used to get over the Vanguards, or so they thought, once the Vanguards had disrupted the enemy line. The Skill enhanced his fall, sending him crashing into the Harvester. It grunted, turning towards Colin and opening itself up to David's Charge.

A second later, David slammed into its side. It swiped out at him, almost sending him stumbling backward. It only failed due to a hasty Earthen Bulwark and it being off balance from both of their attacks.

It was enraged that David didn't move, screaming in anger as both arms lifted high to smash down on him. David wasn't waiting around to take the hit, using Shield Bash at the same time as deactivating Bulwark and leaping backward to send himself out of range of the beast's arms, which were glowing a bright white.

His move was prescient. The Bash barely did anything to it, but it gave him the extra oomph needed to get out of the way. When the Harvester's hands hit the ground, the area underneath them exploded outward and showered David in dirt. The shockwave propelled him farther away from the Harvester, giving him a chance to create a Mana Bolt and send it into the creature.

Colin attacked its rear leg, pulling its attention away from David. As it turned towards him, Aly seemed to step out of its shadow, driving her spear deeper into the cut Colin had made with his halberd. Three lightning bolts struck it, causing it to stumble and only clip Colin, who'd turned his weapon back into the arm blades he'd started with. He blocked the Harvester's attack with his arms crossed, getting knocked onto his back but slicing a finger off.

He rolled away, but not quick enough. A massive fist smashed down at him, only to be deflected by an angled plane of stone. It shattered but moved the fist just enough that Colin was sent flopping away with the explosion, rather than being splattered by it.

Liz stood a few meters behind Colin, her hands on the ground and her face flushed from how much Mana she put into that Skill. She then flung her hand at the Daemon, a javelin of Wood Mana forming as it shot at the beast.

David sent another Mana Bolt into it, forming it entirely out of Earth Mana, and saw more blasts of different types impacting the beast. It stood tall, growling at the minor damage accumulating on it, then both its hands glowed. It clapped them together, a shockwave spreading out from the Daemon and throwing both Aly and Colin back. Dirt and stones from the ground flew out, pinging off David's armor but drawing blood on the dozen elk remaining in the fight. Two thirds of the surviving elk had left, returning to the herd, while the Elder Mountain Elk and many of the older males had stayed.

They retaliated with another bout of coordinated lightning strikes. Three elk combined their abilities into a single stronger hit, punching through the new, shimmering shield that had formed over the beast. It roared at them, slamming a hand into the ground and pulling up a chunk of dirt and rock. The massive handful collapsed into a beach ball sized boulder, and the Daemon pegged one of the elk, sending it crashing to the ground. The animal didn't move afterward.

Colin and David blasted forward at the Harvester again. David shot a Bolt at its face while Sprinting in. It reached for him, but he stopped just out of its reach. Colin used the distraction to stab into the injured leg again, flooding it with Fire Mana. The beast screamed in agony then fell sideways as Colin cut through its tendons. The Daemon grabbed at him, getting ahold of Colin's arm before he could get away. It threw him by the arm, sending him flying into a tree at the edge of the farm.

David winced, but used the distraction to dart forward and stab at the thing's chest. The chiton seemed to flow slightly, blocking the strike with only a small crack as the result.

Swordsman's Step took David to the side as its fist came streaking down at him, and Vanguard's Strike cut into its tricep without any hard surfaces to block. It screamed, a beam of black shooting out and destroying a tree as the Elder Elk ducked under it.

The Daemon's good knee tucked into its chest, hitting David and making him stumble over its planted arm. The gorilla beast flexed and threw him straight up into the air. *Crap, it's going to be waiting for me to land*, he thought, then tried to force Vanguard's Charge to let him dodge sideways. The Skill didn't want to activate, but he pushed back at it. *If you can instantly create momentum when I'm touching the ground, why can you not instantly create it up here!* He bellowed at his core, then shoved Energy and Mana into the channels in his legs and torso, pushing it while he soared upwards.

Just as he hit the crest of his flight, a tiny platform of Earth Mana formed under his right leg, and he shot sideways. It took over a thousand Mana and Energy, five times a typical Vanguard's Charge, to get him out of the way of the beast. He hit the ground ten meters away, collapsing onto his knees and panting as he grew dizzy from Mana usage. A quick check showed he was down to only two hundred Mana, but still had almost nine hundred Energy. *Makes sense, I use Mana more, even if my Energy is higher. Really need to figure out if Energy can be used for ranged attacks somehow. I guess throwing things.*

David Sprinted back to the beast. It had managed to get up, one hand helping it balance. It was trying to swipe at Aly, who was giving tiny scratches to its uninjured leg while dodging. Every dodge was enhanced by an aura of Energy as she used an active Skill. The Daemon grew tired of the game, its body covered by the bright white aura that its hands had before, and struck much faster than previously.

Aly mostly dodged it, her body bending unnaturally while covered in Shadow Mana. The Harvester's arm almost seemed to clip through hers, like a bug in a video game, but the Skill it was using still caught on. The blow sent her tumbling across the field. The enemy turned towards her, but was distracted by more lightning bolts from the elk. It looked over at them, tentacles flapping as it bellowed in rage, and then the dirt under its balancing arm shifted.

It scrambled for a second to get its balance, giving David just enough time to reach it. At the last possible second, he triggered another Vanguard's Charge, focusing on using only Energy as best he could. The drain left him exhausted, but he fought through it. His shield knocked the Daemon's arm out from under it, the Power Attack he followed up with severing it completely at the elbow, then he collapsed into a roll that kept the body of the beast from landing on him.

Its screams were harsh at this point, and got worse when Colin landed another Berserker's Leap and sliced through its good leg. *Its Hit Points must be really low or out*, David thought as he struggled to his feet. *That's gotta be why our attacks suddenly got so much more damaging. The pseudo-shield of the Hit Points is gone.*

The Daemon glared at him hatefully, and a dark aura sprang up around its mouth. David leaped to the side, frantically dodging the beam of Decay it shot at him. His Mana Shield held for a second, letting most of him get out of the way, but his left foot vanished. The damage spread upwards, so he grit his teeth then sliced his leg off just below the knee. He landed on his side and pushed every bit of Mana he had left into a Mana Bolt that took the Harvester in the eye. A massive surge of Essence flowed into him, letting him know it was finally dead.

Colin looted the Daemon, and they all got the popup.

Congratulations! You have looted a Daemon Harvester, level 10!
You receive 5000 Credits, 2000 Essence, and a Major Essence of Force!

Congratulations! You are the third person to slay a Greater Daemon on your planet!
Rewards: +1 modifier to all stats!

Well, that'll be helpful. Should I level first, or try to see if my awesome Skill will fix my leg? Kinda sucks to have to make a prosthetic in the apocalypse. Though, hey, never know, maybe there is something in the Market that I could get. Since I just got another eleven thousand credits. Killing lots of Daemons is super helpful for the old pocketbook. Or the new numbers on a screen. Eh, I think I'm delirious right now, David thought, his mind going in circles as his Pain Resistance Skill fought to bring him back to focus. Energy and Mana flowed into his Advanced Bodily Repair Skill, keeping him alive, but he wasn't in a good mindspace to direct it, making it massively inefficient.

A wash of green stabilized his plummeting Hit Points and cleared his mind. "David, your leg!" Liz said, horrified.

"I'll be fine," David said, sitting up with a grimace. He looked at his leg, his armor pulling back so he could examine the stump. With a thought, he pulled up his Status, and saw that he had a new debuff. "See, my Status says the amputation will heal in twenty one days. With some assistance, I'm hoping we can get it down to a day. We'll have the other teams do some more exploration before the attack."

"Sure, and we can carry you to a better resting location for this," Liz said with a grin.

"Nope, I'm gonna walk," David said stubbornly. He looked back at his leg, then pictured a Mana prosthesis forming. His Mana-Weapon Creation Skill fought him a bit but he persevered. "Help me up?"

Liz grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. The prosthesis wasn't quite right, and he nearly fell. She stabilized him, which let David focus on fixing the length to match his other leg. He then formed a cane, which his Skill didn't fight him on, and hobbled around. "Okay, so I won't be very fast, but this should work," David said. "We need to get rid of that portal, though."

Aly stood nervously next to Liz, scooting in to put his other arm around her shoulders. "Come on, we'll help you to the portal, then you focus on healing, okay? No more losing limbs?"

"Yes, dear," he said, grinning at her fondly, still partially delirious from the pain and then lack of it.

As he said that, the Elder Mountain Elk blasted it with more lightning, and the other elk joined in. It visibly shrank and the surface clouded over again. David limped over to it, then plopped to the ground. "Well, I'm going to check my Skill gains and then level up. afterward, let's close the portal and find a place where we can stop for the night."

Aly looked worriedly at his leg while helping him stay sitting upright. Liz and Collin had followed him there, and lightning shot at the portal over their head again. "Sounds like a plan," Aly said.

"Sure thing," he winked at her. She glowered at him.

He pulled up the consolidated list of gains again, glad that his System didn't fight him against it this time.

Congratulations! Through usage and learning, your Skills have grown!

Mana-Weapon Creation -> Mana-Artifact Creation [S] Apprentice 8

Running -> Beginner 8

Scholar's Vision -> Beginner 4

Sword Mastery -> Beginner 16

Shield Mastery -> Beginner 19

Power Attack -> Beginner 10

Mana Bolt -> Beginner 11

Vanguard's Charge [R] -> Apprentice 2

Pain Resistance -> Beginner 12

Vanguard's Strike -> Beginner 11

Strengthen -> Beginner 12

Sprint -> Beginner 10

Omnicaster [E] -> Apprentice 1

Swordsman's Step -> Beginner 9

Earthen Bulwark -> Beginner 6

Mana Shield -> Beginner 9

Shield Bash -> Beginner 1

Inscribing Scholar's Focus [R] -> Beginner 17

Invigorating Shout [U] -> Beginner 9

A Lord's Presence [R] -> Beginner 7

Lead from the Front [U] -> Beginner 1

Combat Reflexes -> Beginner 13

Spike Field -> Initiate 6

Earth's Unrelenting Motion [A] -> Beginner 10

Minor Muscle Efficiency -> Beginner 1

Ooh, I wonder what I got for Beginner bonuses for Shield Bash and Muscle Efficiency, he thought, then pulled up their Skill page.

Skill: Shield Bash

Level: Beginner 1

Description: Use Energy to smash an opponent with your shield, damaging them and potentially stunning them. Increased damage and stun chance with Skill level.

Beginner Bonus: Able to direct the rebound of the Shield Bash either directly into the ground, stabilizing footing, or directly backward to quickly shift position. Costs additional Energy per use.

Skill: Minor Muscle Efficiency

Level: Beginner 1

Description: Increase the effect of each point of base Strength by a negligible amount. Increased effectiveness with Skill Level.

Beginner Bonus: Reduces required recovery time after extreme exertion by a negligible amount per point of base Constitution.

Okay, both useful. I didn't check what Scholar's Vision, Mana Shield, or Earthen Bulwark got either.

Skill: Scholar's Vision [U]

Level: Beginner 4

Description: Concentrate on a living being to receive information about it. Higher levels give more information. Can examine the flow of Energy, Mana, or Essence in a living creature or construct. Use on a Skill may allow learning of said Skill

Beginner Bonus: Increased effectiveness in spotting Skill usage by opponents

Man, I still haven't been able to learn a Skill with this. Not that I've seriously tried, but the chance must be really low or there is a specific way I need to use it to get it to trigger. When we get back, I'll spend some time watching others spar in the arena. Maybe that'll let me pick it up?

Skill: Mana Shield

Level: Beginner 9

Description: Use Mana to create a small shield surrounding a target for a short time.

Increased level increases damage the shield can take before breaking. May increase Mana cost to increase damage absorbed.

Beginner Bonus: Increased effectiveness when used with aspected Mana

That explains why it worked better with Earth Mana than pure Mana.

Skill: Earthen Bulwark

Level: Beginner 6

Description: Infuse Energy and Mana into your feet and legs, strengthening them and attaching you to the ground. Gives increased resistance to push, knockback, and force attacks by skill level. Increases armor by skill level. Unworked Earth surrounding you is strengthened by a tiny amount and will absorb a portion of the damage and force you receive. Increased effect by skill level. May slowly shuffle feet. Immediately ends if your feet move quickly.

Beginner Bonus: May strengthen worked Earth beneath your feet

Ooh, it'll work on the wall now! Not sure how that helps, but I guess as I've gotten stronger, I can take a hit that would crack stone. This way the wall won't collapse under me when that happens. Okay, enough stalling. Time to level. I need to spend sixteen hundred more Essence on stats. So eight more. Nerve and Agility are my lowest, so I'll put three into each, and then two into Presence.

Congratulations! You stand tall in front of your people! You are the first person on your planet to reach level 9! You are the ninth person in your quadrant to reach level 9!

Rewards:

- +8 to all Statistics!

- +500 to Hit Points, Energy, and Mana
- Two Apprentice Skill Stones chosen from your Beginner Skills (Select)

“My Mana and Energy cores are getting ridiculous,” David said aloud. “I’m up to a maximum of three thousand seven hundred or so of each. My Con is over one hundred and fifty with modifiers. Also, apparently we’re catching up with everyone in our quadrant, whatever that is. I was the ninth in it, but first on our planet.”

“Great! My turn,” Colin said, pulling up his Status.

“Well, use your new Mana and Energy,” Aly said, pointing at the glowing portal over our heads. “Still got almost four hundred thousand to go.”

“Sure,” David laughed. “Going to go slow, though. My channels are all hurting still.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It took three hours of near continuous channeling to finally close the portal. Liz dumped in the last few hundred Mana, the portal shimmering and then popping like a soap bubble, and the four of them collapsed to the ground beside it. In its place hovered a crystal, about halfway in size between the Outpost Crystal at the fish farm and Hope's Refuge's City Crystal. David collapsed in relief, his chest and arms aching as way too much Energy and Mana had flowed through them.

Congratulations! You are the third group to close a Greater Portal on your planet! This is your 7th portal closed!

Reward: Title - Forerunners upgraded to Prime Forerunners!

Title: Prime Forerunners - Gain a +10 modifier to all stats. All skills gain experience a lesser amount faster! All Mana and Energy Skills will be a tiny bit more efficient! Mana and Energy spent to close portals will be a small amount more efficient!

Congratulations! You have closed a Large Greater Portal to the Daemon Realm: Reward 2000 Essence!

"Closing portals sure is rewarding," Colin said, lying down next to him. Liz was slumped on Colin's chest, rubbing her arms. Aly was the only one still standing, looking around to guard the other three.

"If only it was easier," Liz laughed.

"Yeah, but then it wouldn't be as rewarding," David joked. "Which one of you wants to activate the crystal? I can't reach it until I regrow my leg."

"I'll poke at it," Aly said. She reached over and patted David's head. "You get to work."

"I'm going to check my Ways list, see if anything pops out at me that will help," David said. "But then yeah, that's next." He grimaced as he looked at the stump where his foot used to be.

Available Ways: Protector (0/500), Runner (0/500), Berserker (0/500), Scout (0/500), Mage II (0/500) Shield Beginner (0/1000), Leader III (0/3000), City Knight (0/3000), Augmented (0/10000), Frontliner (0/1000), Shieldwall (0/1000), Scholar III (0/2000), Vanguard III (0/1500), Regenerator (0/2500), Earth Mage III (0/1500), Body Temperer (0/2000), Metal Mage II (0/1000), Cultivator (0/10000), Swimmer (0/500), Omnicaster (0/3000), Beast Leader (0/1500), Mana Artificer (0/3000)

Well, Regenerator is the obvious choice here, he thought. Though Cultivator, sounds like something I should save up for. Maybe in a level or two, or more likely five. Omnicaster and Mana Artificer sound awesome, and I could get them, but I don't think they'll help me with my pirate problem. Beast Leader must've come from the elk. I wonder why? Ooh, maybe I can get the Elk to show me his lightning and earth attacks, and they'll strengthen mine? I wonder if I can get lightning Mana from the Metal Mage Way? Ahh, too many options, but I need to have a leg soon, so Regenerator it is.

All told, he received 10 stats from the way, four Constitution, four Nerve, an Intelligence, and a Wisdom. Rather than a Skill, at twelve hundred and fifty Essence he received a twenty percent increase in all of his regenerations, making him even more the Energizer bunny. *Just gotta make my channels stronger so that I can actually use my ridiculous stats*, he thought. Finally, the end result gave him a much desired boost to his Advanced Bodily Repair Skill.

Congratulations! You have walked the Way of the Regenerator! Stand tall for all time in front of your people. You are the fourth person to Walk a Way of this nature on your planet! Receive bonus effectiveness! You have received the Skill - Directed Regeneration! Extreme Synergy with Scarce rarity Skill Advanced Bodily Repair. Skill Directed Regeneration subsumed.

Skill: Advanced Bodily Repair (Scarce).

Level: Beginner 8

Description: Direct Mana, Energy, or both to repair any physical injuries you have taken. Mentally directing resources gives significant bonuses. Using both resources in equal amounts gives significant bonuses. Increase effectiveness and bonuses per Skill Level, Wisdom, and Constitution.

Directed Regeneration: Mana and Energy efficiency increased by a sizable amount. If consciousness is lost and Hit Points are at less than 10% of max, will automatically activate.

Essences: Minor Fire - Increased effectiveness stopping bleeding, poisons, and diseases.

Advanced Blood - Increased effectiveness of Skill overall. Miniscule increase in healing ability without spending Energy.

Beginner Bonus: Decreased ingestion needs after usage.

"Okay, that worked better than expected," David said, then described his upgrade. "I'm going to work on regrowing my leg. Don't mind me if I scream a bit."

Aly gave him a worried look, but he just winked at her then fell into his core cave. His cores glowed brightly, the red-gold and blue-white of his Energy and Mana swirling around above his metaphorical head. "Even with dropping so much of my resources, I'm still almost full. I really need to work on my channels. I wonder how big of a Mana Bolt or Power Attack I could do if I could shove a thousand Mana or Energy into it. Well, or the Skill will just shatter."

With a thought, he directed a continuous stream of both Energy and Mana out of his cores, ten or so every second. The total level barely dropped, his regeneration more than enough for that amount. Mentally, he flew down the channels to his leg and tried to get it to regrow. The resources pooled for a second, then flowed into his shin bones. They slowly grew outward, and then the muscle followed. It took nearly a minute for his leg to grow by a millimeter.

This is going to take a while, he thought. He stopped directing the Mana and Energy, and the speed of growth immediately dropped to a quarter of what it was. He popped out of his core cave and looked at the end of his leg. The skin was red and raw, but not painful. It bulged slightly where the bone was poking at it, but the Skill was growing his skin just as fast as the bone. He measured his leg against the other, then looked up at Liz, who was watching interestedly. "Probably going to take six hours to grow back if I focus on it," he said. "Maybe if I'm pushing and you heal, it'll go faster?"

"I can try at least," Liz said. "Give me five minutes to see if I have a good Way to spend my Essence on."

David nodded, then went back to focusing on his Skill, trying to guide and direct it to the best of his ability. Inscribing Scholar's Vision became incredibly useful when he realized that his channels weren't growing back at the same rate as the rest of his leg. He redirected the Mana flowing out of the ends to make a tube, and the Energy to reinforce the structure and regrow his channels. *Not becoming a cripple who can't use Vanguard's Charge or Sprint because my channels don't reach my foot*, he thought.

His jaw clenched, and a tiny stream of Energy moved from his core to the runic representation of Pain Resistance. The channels in his leg felt like they were being recreated with lava, burning through his muscles, tendons, and bones whenever they intersected. *I will not give up!* He mentally screamed at himself.

A jolt of green Mana flowed into the end of his leg, speeding up the regeneration and soothing the pain slightly. He formed a rictus of a smile at Liz, who got a pained look on her face. Time passed, and finally, he was burning the last bit of channels into his heel and toes. He opened his eyes to see Liz was panting where she knelt over his newly formed foot. "Out of Mana?" David asked.

"Very low anyway," she said.

"Here," he reached over and lightly grabbed her shoulder. Activating A Leader's Gift, he quickly poured two thousand Mana out of his core, giving her somewhere around two hundred and thirty. Her breath came easier, the exhaustion and headache that dropping below ten percent of your Mana causes, fading with the injection.

"Thanks," she said.

"Wait, when did that form," he exclaimed, looking past Liz to see a three meter tall stone wall. A walkway just below the top provided a stable fighting surface, and large crystals dotted the top, glowing a bright white to combat the gloom of the night. The aurora from the Essence Wave kept it from growing too dark, but the swirling lights often made it harder to see, so the pure white lamps would reveal anything approaching from outside the walls.

"The crystal was a Fortification Crystal," Aly said, grabbing his armpits and pulling him to his feet. "Claiming it gave us a level two Fort, which gave us the walls and a keep." She looked down at his new foot, which he realized was sitting bare.

With a thought, he covered it with his armor.

"How does it feel?" she asked.

"Kinda tingly," David said, "but it doesn't hurt. I'm glad I could grow it, but it's also kinda weird, you know? We're superheroes, and I just healed from an amputation."

"Life has gotten crazy," she said, pulling him into a hug, "but at least we're together."

"I couldn't do this without you," he said. David then turned to see a three story stone tower, ten meters in diameter or so. "The ground floor is a kitchen, dining area, and armory, the middle floor is bunk beds and an Inscribed bathroom, and the top floor has three bedrooms attached to a map room. The top has space for a ballistae, but it didn't come free."

Liz grinned, "And because this area used to be a farm, we got two free Farms just outside the walls. We will need to build a warehouse to store the food in."

"Eventually we will need to make some more housing too," David said. "But it's probably enough for now."

“Depending on how people cram into the bunk area or the bedrooms, we could fit thirty or so,” Colin said. “We really need to find more people.”

A new City, Salida’s Revenge has been founded in your name! You now control four Crystals. No Corruption present in the area between all four Crystals. Your position is upgraded from City Lord to Baron! You are the first Baron on your planet!
Title gained: First Baron!

Title: First Baron

Description: All buildings in your Barony gain +200 Durability. You may change your Barony’s focus once per six months. You may designate two locations to be Dungeons, instead of one. All portals attempting to form in your Barony will be redirected to the Dungeons. Essence Draw for all Crystals in your Barony increased by 15%.

“What happened?” Aly asked, worry in her voice.

“Apparently the team down in Salida found a City Crystal and claimed it in my name,” David said, his eyes wide. “And you’re now married to a Baron instead of a Lord.” He thumped his chest. “Pretty good catch, huh?”

She smacked the back of his head, then leaned in and kissed him. “Yup,” she grinned, “But what does it mean?”

He read out what the First Baron title provided, and then Colin asked, “Dungeons?”

David shrugged. “Let’s head to the map room, maybe it’ll have more information about what the options are?”

They trooped into the Keep. To his surprise, the stairs were not in the center, but to his left. Straight ahead was a large open area before the far wall which had two large ovens and a stove made of stone. Glimmering Inscriptions were visible on the stovetop. To his right was an open doorway, inside which a dozen racks could be seen. The door was thick and made of iron. Aly led him upstairs two floors, where the open area held the Fortification Crystal and a map table.

David stepped up to the table, and noticed that the display was centered on Hope’s Refuge, not the fort they were standing in. A weirdly pointed quadrilateral was highlighted, each point one of the Crystals that he ostensibly controlled. “What’d you name this place?” He asked.

“Farmer’s Fort,” Aly said. “I like alliteration.”

He just shook his head, “Okay. Now let’s see what this says.” He touched the table.

Welcome Baron Black! Your Barony has just been founded. What do you wish your Barony to specialize in?

Options: Military, Scholarly Arts, Expansion, Agricultural Production, Raw Resource Production, Manufactured Goods Production, Trade, General

He selected the Military option to see if there was more detail.

Military Specialization: Your Barony focuses on strengthening your armed forces over any

other options.

Benefits: All soldiers will experience a small increase in Skill growth for weapon, armor, and combat Skills.

All non-combat skills will have a tiny decrease in Skill growth.

All non-weapon, armor, or combat production reduced by a tiny amount.

All combat production increased by a tiny amount.

Market prices increased by a small amount.

City Crystal production costs decreased a tiny amount.

Confirm: Yes / No

He quickly hit No, dismissing the military option. They explored the rest, each giving some benefits to a section of the economy or government, but causing penalties to other areas. The penalties were smaller than the bonuses, but typically more comprehensive as well. "If we had more people," David said. "I think the expansion option would be best, just to create more safe areas. We just don't have the people to hold it yet."

"At least you can change the selection in six months," Aly said with a shrug. "So we should pick what's best for right now."

"So, research, trade, or general seem to be the best options," David said.

"General, a miniscule bonus to everything is what we need now," Josiah's voice came through the communication system, having been patched into their discussion at the map. "We don't know enough about everything else to focus yet. We need military power, but we also need more food and resources outside of fighting."

Everyone else on the call gave their affirmation over the next minute. "Okay, we are now a general barony," David said, selecting the decided option. "Now it is forcing me to select at least one Dungeon location. Looks like I can buy more, but they cost a million City Essence, taken from any of the Crystals. Good thing we got two free." He laughed nervously. "I can't place it within two kilometers of any of the Crystals. Two locations are highlighted, one right beside where 285 crosses Chalk Creek, and then another ten kilometers farther south, just off 285 at a," he zoomed in, "Old school house?"

"There was a museum there," Michelle chimed in.

"What does the Dungeon do, besides move the portals?" Josiah asked.

"Hold on," David said, navigating through a couple of menus. "Ah, here we go. It focuses Essence like a City Crystal, forming a Dungeon Crystal in the center. Daemons are summoned into the Dungeon instead of through any portal, and they won't know they are being trapped until they appear. The System will also place traps and rewards, usually giving Essence crystals but occasionally other options. Traps and Daemons are limited to the Dungeon, as long as it is cleared regularly. If we fail to do so, or Daemons enter from outside and reach the Crystal, the Crystal becomes a Greater Portal and every Daemon inside is freed."

"So just like all those Dungeon Core books you liked to read," Aly joked with him.

"Can someone act as the Dungeon Master?" Colin asked.

"No idea," David said. "I don't have that option now, but maybe after we make one?"

"Put it close for now," Josiah said. "Right by the creek should be fine. I'll take a squad out there to see what it looks like."

"Alright, selecting that one. Good, it isn't making me put the second one down yet. I do have a limit of one hundred days before it has to be placed," David said. "Plenty of time to figure stuff out. Let us know what happens later. We need to focus on the upcoming fight."

"Are you still up to attacking tonight?" Josiah asked.

David looked at his friends, and they all nodded. "Yeah, the others got to laze about while I was regrowing my leg. Turns out, amputations aren't permanent in the system."

"What!" Michelle said, concern in her voice. "You lost a leg?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I regrew it, and the Daemon that did it is dead," David said, forcing a grin. "But we should leave soon if we're going to be ready to hit the Daemons by morning."

"Can you delegate power for your Barony?" Josiah asked.

David looked quickly. "Yup, here. There are some things you can do as my Seneschal, but not much. Thankfully, it doesn't look like there are any major decisions necessary on a routine basis for the Barony."

"Good luck, then. I will have a team of ten go to hold the new Fortification. They will be able to support you after your attack if necessary. Stay alive, since I know you aren't going to stay safe," Josiah said.

David grinned, "You too old man." He looked at Aly, then Colin, then Liz. "Let's go."

They rushed down the stairs, and out the northern gate. There were two, one on the north side leading to a fifty-yard clearing before the forest began again, and one on the south side that opened onto the two farms. Barely visible through the trees to the north was another clearing.

Aly vanished into the trees, then communicated, "Another broken down farm here. No Corruption or Daemons."

"Let's Sprint through it, make up some time and distance with the open area," David said.

FINISH CHAPTER EIGHTEEN CHARACTER SHEET

NAME:	David								
LEVEL:	9 Ways	Stats	Total						
FREE		1800							
ESSENCE:	3139.94	18000	0	45000	Required to Level				
TITLE:	Prime Forerunner, First Cleanser, First Lord, First Baron			22500	Required per category				
				36000	Total towards level				
CREDITS:	18247								
HIT									
POINTS:	4427								
ENERGY:	3825								
MANA:	3759								
Name	Base	Modifier	Final	Name	Base	Modifier	Final		
STR:	82	46	128	INT:	96	40	136		
AGI:	80	45	125	WIS:	93	44	137		
CON:	112	48	160	PRE:	85	42	127		
NERV:	86	43	129						
PATH	Lvl 5: Lord(E)								
SKILLS:	Mana-Artifact Creation (App 8), Hiking (Beg 4), Running (Beg 8), Scholar's Vision[U](Beg 4), Sneak (Beg 10), Sword Mastery (Beg 16), Shield Mastery (Beg 19) Power Attack (Beg 10), Mana Bolt (Beg 11), Vanguard's Charge [R](App 2), Pain Resistance (Beg 12), Mana-Inscription [U](Beg 8), Vanguard's Strike (Beg 11), Strengthen (Beg 12), Sprint (Beg 10), Omnicaster [E](App 1), Swordsman's Step (Beg 9), Earthen Bulwark (Beg 6), Mana Shield (Beg 9), Shield Bash (Beg 1), Inscribing Scholar's Focus [R] (Beg 17), Drawing (Beg 5), Invigorating Shout[U] (Beg 9), A Lord's Presence[R] (Beg 7), Lead from the Front(U) (Beg 1), Combat Reflexes (Beg 13), A Leader's Gift (Nov 5), A Leader's Due (Nov 3), Spike Field (Init 6), Advanced Bodily Repair [S] (Beg 8), Earth's Unrelenting Motion [A] (Beg 10), Minor Muscle Efficiency (Beg 1), Swimming (Init 4)								
Completed Ways:	Way of the Novice (100/100), Tireless (500/500), Fighter (200/200), Vanguard (500/500), Marcher (200/200), Sprinter (200/200), Mage (200/200), Defender (500/500), Initiate (200/200), Sword Novice (500/500), Scholar (500/500), Leader (500/500), Novice Inscrber (500/500), Shield Novice (500/500), City Lord (2500/2500), Earth Mage (500/500), Vanguard II (750/750), Forefront I (1000/1000), Champion (1250/1250), Scholar II (1000/1000), Leader II (1500/1500), Earth Mage II (1000/1000), Tireless II (1000/1000), Unrelenting (1000/1000), Metal Mage (500/500), Lifter (500/500), Multicaster (1000/1000)								

Available WAYS:	Protector (0/500), Runner (0/500), Berserker (0/500), Scout (0/500), Mage II (0/500) Shield Beginner (0/1000), Leader III (0/3000), City Knight (0/3000), Augmented (0/10000), Frontliner (0/1000), Shieldwall (0/1000), Scholar III (0/2000), Vanguard III (0/1500), Regenerator (0/2500), Earth Mage III (0/1500), Body Temperer (0/2000), Metal Mage II (0/1000), Cultivator (0/10000), Swimmer (0/500), Omnicaster II(0/3000), Beast Leader (0/1500), Mana Artificer (0/3000)							
EQUIPME NT:	Mana-Augmented Power Suit lvl 3, Mana-Focusing Hilt - arming sword, Mana-Focusing Handle - Heater Shield, Interdimensional Storage Device - Belt - Tier One							
TIER UPGRADE:	8/8	Apprentice Ways						
	1/8	Apprentice Skills						
	8/8	Level Required						

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They ran for another couple of hours, alternating Sprinting through open areas and carefully Hiking through underbrush. Only twice did they Sneak, avoiding what looked like a patrol of Imps flying over the trees that had appeared with the apocalypse. While they could have defeated them easily, they worried that doing so would alert the rest of the Daemons that they were coming. Finally, they reached the edge of the forest, nearly stumbling onto Highway 24. To their west the highway crossed the river, the bridge extending to match the massive increase in the river's size.

Two dozen Grunts hooted and grunted to each other behind a waist-high wall that blocked the bridge. Past them, a small group of Imps cackled as they launched magic attacks at the fish in the river. Every once in a while, a blast of Water Mana shot back at them.

Aly vanished from David's senses, sneaking out to scout the bridge. David waited anxiously, resisting the urge to speak to her via the communication system, worried it'd distract her at an inopportune time. After a few minutes, he slunk backward into undergrowth. He then proceeded to pace in Sneak, getting minute quantities of experience in it due to the fairly distant Daemon's.

"You okay?" Colin asked.

"Just worried. I trust her and believe she'll be fine, but still," David responded. They waited impatiently, only to jump when Aly appeared out of nowhere.

"Nice," she said. "Stealth went up to Apprentice 6." She took a deep breath. "Across the bridge there is a Corruption farm, or that's what it looks like. They have twenty humans who are spreading a slop onto the edge of a very large Corruption patch. The stuff they put down seems to turn the Mana and Energy the people feed into it into more Corruption. It's not a fast process. There are four Grunt Alpha's watching the group, but I think the collar's are Inscribed, or whatever the Daemon equivalent is. I didn't try to get close enough to check. Stealth in the open is pretty difficult, and Corruption makes it harder."

"That is perfect," David said. "Team's One, Two and Three, this is Lord. We are in a position to try and grab twenty humans from the Daemons. Are you ready for your diversions?"

"This is Team One. We have eyes on twenty survivors as well," a male voice came through the comm system.

"Lord, this is Team Three. We see a large force of Grunts moving south. We can perform hit and run attacks against them in five minutes," a female voice said.

"Lord, this is Team Two, we have identified a storage facility for something the Grunt Alphas and other leaders use. On your signal, we can burn it down," another guy reported.

"Okay. Team Two and Team Three, coordinate your attacks in five minutes. Team One and we will rescue survivors five minutes after you begin. Priority is your survival and freedom. We can always try again another day," David said.

"Roger," all three team leaders responded.

They spent the next five minutes Sneaking as close to the Grunts guarding the bridge as they could, ending up only fifteen meters from the small fortification. "Attacking," Team Two's leader said suddenly. Ten seconds later, a large explosion was heard, and the Imps flying over the river turned and flew off.

David started to charge up a Mana Bolt, focusing on putting Metal Mana in the tip and pure Mana in the shaft of the magical crossbow bolt that his Skill created. Beside him, Aly vanished as she moved to flank the Grunts, while Colin and Liz both charged some other Skill.

Most of the Grunts had turned to look back into Buena Vista, rather than pay attention to the road they were supposed to be guarding. Only three kept their eyes on the correct location. David made a second Bolt, then indicated the two on the left that were paying attention. Liz nodded and pointed at the rightmost target, while Colin grinned and mimicked a large explosion with his left hand, his right pushing more Mana into a Mana Grenade.

"Five, four, three, two, one," David counted down, then both Bolt's exploded out of his hands. Both Grunts dropped, the Skills mentally-directed to split their heads apart. A spike of Wood nailed Liz's target. David Charged at the remaining Daemons, who screeched in shock at the dead among them. Just as they were turning back towards the road, Colin's Mana Grenade blew apart five of them and staggered the rest.

David slammed into the crude wall they'd erected, the wave of Energy exploding from his reflexively summoned shield shattering the small logs apart. Two Grunts screamed as large splinters of wood stabbed them, only to be silenced by a Vanguard's Slash. Colin leaped into the midst of the rest, laying about himself with his wrist blades. A Mana Grenade from Liz broke apart the last of the resistance, David quickly putting the last injured Grunt down.

He reached out and looted the closest, tagging as many as he could in thirty seconds. "Let's move," he said. He Sprinted across the bridge. At the other edge, he saw two Grunt Alphas turning towards the bridge while the other two were herding their slaves away. Aly suddenly appeared, leaping onto one of the herders back and stabbing deep into its neck. The humans immediately just dropped, laying flat on the ground, cowering in fear.

David sent a Bolt at the nearest Alpha, keeping their attention when it started to turn away. Five meters from it, it gestured at him, sending a beam of Mana that stopped his Sprint cold. The other Alpha roared, leaping into the air at him. It grinned in victory, only to be smacked out of the sky by Colin. Colin's halberd smashed the Alpha into the ground, cracking its insectile carapace.

David held in place, using Earthen Bulwark to resist the push of the Alpha's Skill. The Daemon pushed harder, more Mana flowing out of it, until a spike of Wood stabbed into it, transforming into a set of vines that tried to tie it down. The Alpha resisted, but the vines managed to drag its beam away from David, giving him the opportunity to Vanguard's Charge across the bridge into the Daemon. It staggered backward, only to scream when a Power Attack cut into its leg.

The Alpha's fist smashed cracks into David's shield, pushing him a step away, and then another beam shot out and blasted it apart. The beam cut into his shoulder, and David screamed in agony while stabbing upward into the thing's neck. The attack cut off when the Daemon was decapitated, David's sword cutting through its spinal cord.

He looked over to find Aly had dealt with both of hers, the collared humans still cowering on the ground. There were no Daemons within sight, every available one apparently having headed to intercept the other teams. David rushed over to one of the cowering humans. "It's okay. We're here to rescue you," he said.

"No, don't touch me," the girl begged. "The collar will kill me if you do."

"Okay," David said, keeping his hands up. "Let me look at it, and I'll see if I can figure out how to take it off. I won't touch it without your permission, okay?"

She hesitatingly nodded, obviously terrified out of her mind.

"Can you stand?" David asked.

She shook her head. "We have orders to lay flat on the ground if there is an attack," she said. "Only an Alpha or higher rank Daemon can countermand that order."

"Okay," David said, then he knelt next to her. He bent close, but didn't touch the collar. The simple metal band had a dozen runes carved throughout it, glowing a baleful red-black color. "Can you roll to your other side?"

She rolled over, going from face down to face up. David noticed she'd be fairly pretty, if not for the expression of terror on her face. "Roll over once again," he instructed, and she complied. "There, if I inject my own Mana at this location, I can short out the locking mechanism without triggering the security effects. May I try?"

She shook her head, too scared to let him try. "I volunteer as tribute," another young woman said from close by. David grinned as he walked over to her. She was in her mid-twenties, with short brown hair that was matted with oil and dirt. Her bright green eyes looked at him with curiosity, the freckles on her fair skin barely visible though the grime working in a quasi-farm-like environment had coated her face with.

"Are you sure?" David asked.

"I'd rather die than keep serving them," she stated simply. "If you can figure out how to save the rest of my colleagues, my death will be worth it."

David nodded, then said, "I need you to roll over, then. The right location is on the back of the neck." She rolled over, her stiff movements showing her nerves. David admired her conviction, sticking with it even through her terror. He reached down, gently touching the target rune before sending a surge of Mana into it. His Mana Inscription Skill pinged at him, and he changed the makeup of the Mana. He directed it to break the connection between two surrounding runes, and after a minute the collar clicked and came open.

David gently removed the collar. Once it was free of her neck, she rolled over and threw herself into his arms. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she repeated, over and over again.

"You're welcome," he said. "But now I need to do the rest of the collars."

She quickly let go, falling back to the ground. Liz rushed over, reaching down to check over her. "Oh you poor dear," Liz said. "Let me heal the worst of your injuries. We have a safe space to head to, but it's a bit away." Her hands glowed green as she gently grabbed the sobbing girl's shoulder.

David moved back to the first young woman, who promptly lay flat on her belly to give him access to her collar. "Please," she begged.

He checked the collar again, ensuring that it was the same as the previous one. The location of the correct rune was slightly different, but not enough to make her have to change position. He followed his Skills direction, separating the collar from the trembling girl. She lay as still as she could, not moving even when the collar was removed.

David patted her shoulder then moved on to a young man. He noticed now that every person in the slave labor group was in their late teens through their early thirties. *I don't want to ask yet. After they're all free*, he thought as he shorted out a third collar.

"Hurry," Aly said. "There is a group of Daemons forming up at their fortress. It is only a kilometer away."

David nodded sharply, "Everyone make a line off me," he commanded. The next enslaved person crawled in front of him, and he only gave the collar a cursory inspection before finding the right rune. With a zap, it was off. The guy tried to give him a hug, but David shrugged it off. "Later, no time."

There were still six people collared when the Imp patrol returned. The Daemons screamed loudly, then sent a barrage of elemental attacks at the group. Aly and Liz formed various shields, one inky black and another nature green. Two broke through their attempts. Colin leaped into one before it could hit a young woman, and the other missed the group entirely.

David stopped paying attention, quickly moving to the next person to be freed. "Five more," he yelled out, stepping to the side and reaching for his neck. The guy jerked a bit just when David started to channel his Mana, then screamed as the collar heated up. The sizzling of cooking skin made David nauseous, but he ignored that and shifted the guy roughly. The collar clicked off, and the guy collapsed.

"Don't move," David barked to the next person, who trembled but held still. He made no mistakes, forcibly holding the girl still with one hand this time, and the collar clicked off without any injury. She immediately put her hand on the injured man's shoulder, and it glowed white while quieting his whimpers. "You're a healer?" David asked.

"Yes sir," she said. "We were allowed to spend some Essence to level up twice. I was given permission to become a healer so that we could work harder."

"Look out!" Aly yelled.

David twisted to see two fireballs heading right for the kneeling girl. He jumped up, forming and extending his shield into a bowl shape. The fireballs exploded in the shield, the flame and shockwave deflected away from everyone else by his shield. It blew David into the ground, driving the breath from his lungs with a grunt.

He snapped a Mana Bolt at one of the swooping Daemons. It dodged with a shriek of laughter, another fireball forming in its hands. A Wood Spike pierced through its side, and the fireball detonated, knocking two other Imps about. David turned to the last four, reaching down and flooding Mana into the first collar he could reach.

It took him almost a minute to get the other three people freed. Several screams from the other freed people made him wince, knowing that they were injured, but he didn't let it distract him. He was the only one who could free the rest, so that was his job right now. "Last one freed, let's get out of here," he yelled out while pulling the man to his feet.

He looked towards the bridge to see that it was still clear, but from farther down the road he saw a force of at least thirty Grunts, along with five Alphas and a dozen Daemons that were halfway between the two in size that were wearing full plate armor and holding wicked looking axes.

"We need to leave," Liz said. "Run!"

David moved to the road, standing between the others and the oncoming Daemon force. Everyone ran past, the newly freed stumbling about. David looked back, then started to cast Spike Field over and over again, filling the edge of the bridge with the stone spike dense enough to make a wall. Each cast was overcharged, filled to bursting with Earth Mana.

He turned and ran, picking up a young woman who stumbled to the ground in front of him. He threw her over his right shoulder, dismissing his sword and shield, then scooped up another young woman. "Faster!"

Colin saw him then nodded, grabbing the next two slowest runners. Liz and Aly copied them, letting the group speed up a bit. Behind them, the Daemons broke into a sprint, slowly eating the distance between them. "We need to get back to the new fort," David said. "Seneschal, how long until the backup team arrives at the fort?"

"Hold," Josiah said. Ten seconds later, "they estimate around an hour."

"We are headed there now, being pursued by almost fifty Daemons."

Silence met him for a bit, then Josiah said, "They will make it in forty minutes now."

"If we keep this pace," Liz said, "We'll be there in almost two hours, but I doubt we'll be able to. There will be too much undergrowth in the way."

They ran, then broke into the forest once the road curved enough to hide them from sight, even if only for a minute. Aly took the lead, setting down her passengers before slipping through the forest. She stayed in sight, though, and the freed people followed her. Every once in a while they grimaced, the rags they were wearing getting caught on branches or skin scratched by thorns. David and Liz drew up the rear, with Liz encouraging the plants behind them to grow, hoping to disguise their passage.

The group moved for nearly an hour before Colin told Aly, "I'll take over guiding. Can you scout behind us?"

She nodded, stepping to the side and then vanishing into Stealth. The young woman she was next to gasped in surprise.

"Is anyone running low on Energy?" David asked.

"We all are," panted the healer girl.

David nodded, "We can do this!" he Shouted, then rushed past everyone else to Colin. He hit then slowed down and used A Leader's Gift to give a hundred Energy to the first person in line. The young man perked up a bit, but Colin didn't speed up. David repeated this with the next two, then paused for a minute to recharge his Energy before each of the rest.

Once he hit the last, Colin increased their speed by a small amount, and David repeated his effort. *With this Skill*, he marveled to himself. *I can keep an entire group moving faster. At higher levels, I'll be able to share almost the entirety of my regeneration with everyone around me. Gotta level it up a bunch more, and increase my regen too. It's really good for me, but sharing it twenty ways is still only a trickle.*

Ten minutes later, Aly's voice sounded in his ear, "They are still following. The turn off confused them for a bit, but they got back on our trail. You need to hurry."

"Got it, get back to us safe," David said. "Will we beat them to the fort?"

She didn't respond for a second, then said, "It'll be close, I think."

David opened his helmet again and softly called out, "We need to speed up again. Push it."

Grimly, the stumbling people pushed themselves just a little harder.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The clearing with the new fortification opened in front of David, and he smiled grimly at it. "We're there," he told Josiah. "And we need help."

"Steve is the leader of the group," Josiah said. "Team five, Lord, they are there. How far back are the Daemons?"

"Ten minutes," Aly said, piping into my communication stream.

David gently set down the young women he was carrying. Both girls groaned in tiredness, having pushed themselves until they literally collapsed several times over the last hours. David then sent a Mana Bolt streaming over the fortification. "Team five, we need help carrying the rescuees, most of them are unable to walk anymore."

"On our way," Steve said. David saw the large man leap off the wall, and a few seconds later a small spattering of people came running around from the north gate.

David turned and helped the last few former slaves out of the forest. "You're safe now," he said.

"We'll take care of you," Liz said, healing Mana flowing from her hands into the strained muscles, blisters, and cuts that their flight had caused. Colin just kept going, heading for the fort with the four people that were hanging off of him.

"Come on," David told the two girls and then lifted them up again. He passed Steve and the others. "Liz is waving you down. Let's get them into the fort and give them a chance to rest and recover. Then we need to plan for the Daemons coming."

"We'll smash them to pieces," Steve said with a grin, running past David to lift two more people.

David didn't bother heading to the gate and simply leaped to the top of the wall, then used Vanguard's Charge to redirect his momentum down to the ground on the other side. The blast of Energy scattered across the stone ground he landed on, and he gently set the girls down. "I'll be back," he said with a bad accent.

"Oh, are there terminators too?" One of them whispered, looking around fearfully.

"No, sorry," David said. "We'll explain what we know after we deal with our pursuers."

"You're going to fight them?" she whimpered. "They always hurt us so much when we fought back."

"These aren't the first Daemons we've killed," David said confidently. "Nor will they be the last. We're going to remove them from our planet entirely."

"But they were so strong," she whispered. "They overpowered everyone, especially Abez'thib'u. He laughed as he killed a dozen strong men."

"I will take care to destroy him then," David said, "but now, I must go." He gently pried her hand off his, then turned and jumped to the top of the fort's walls. *Wow, these really aren't super great at keeping things out, are they?* He thought to himself. Colin landed beside him, and they both watched as the team that Josiah had sent brought the rest of the freed people across the open area.

"Aly, how long do we have?" Colin asked.

"No more than two minutes," she said. "I'm heading around them now. There's too many for me to hit them from behind."

"Good call. We'll be ready," David said. He cupped his hands over his mouth, "Hurry."

The superhuman nature of everyone sworn to David shown through as they picked up the people they were assisting and Sprinted. Everyone had the Skill, even the four people dressed in what could charitably be called mage's robes, or sarcastically called bathrobes. A quick scan of everyone's level put the newbies at two, and every member of the team at at least five. Steve was the highest at seven, which impressed David. *He's been going on missions or something*, David thought. *Only way he's up that high already. That's awesome.*

Less than a minute later, two people David hadn't met yet were helping the rescued people into the keep, while everyone else congregated around David. Aly rushed out of the trees, Sprinting across the field. Her voice shot out of his earpiece, "They're right behind me! Aerial forces incoming."

David manifested a Mana Bolt, looking over the trees. Flying above them, six black dots quickly became human-sized beings with massive wings. They still had the ugly, pug-like faces of the imps, but their bodies were sculpted like Michelangelo's David statue, to include the tiny penis. David concentrated on the lead thing and activated Scholar's Vision.

Name: Lesser Incubus

Level: 8

Description: An evolved form of an Imp. Capable of damaging long-range magics and moderately capable with melee weapons.

"Those are evolved Imps," David said. "Blast them out of the sky!" He activated Invigorating Shout

Colin charged up a Mana Bolt as well. His was sparking, a brilliant yellow enfusing the Bolt where David's Bolt was a mixture of brown and silver. Two of the teammates, one of whom David recognized as Lisa, pulled out bows and began infusing them with Energy and Mana both. The people wearing mage's robes summoned a variety of Skills. One Fireball, another a ball of Water Mana, and two swirls of shimmering Air hovered above outstretched palms.

David targeted the third Incubus, then shot out his Mana Bolt. He quickly summoned another, blasting it to the left of his target, and then another to the right. The Incubus dodged the first one, but the third took it in the leg as it tried to rise over it. David got really lucky with the second shot, though, as the fourth Incubus in the assault line dodged an arrow and the Fireball only to take his Metal-infused Mana Bolt in the face. It screamed loudly enough that everyone heard it and dropped. As it fell, another arrow from Lisa exploded through its face.

Colin's Mana Bolt thundered across the sky, moving faster than David could see. His target was wholly unable to dodge, and the Incubus' wings locked up as the Lightning Mana Bolt acted like a taser. It didn't fall far. Colin's stats and Skill levels were stacked more towards the physical. The enemy still only flew drunkenly, the damage significant.

They responded with a barrage of magic. David quickly formed a shield, then rushed in front of the two archers. He took a blast of a dark Mana that made the back of his mind shiver. He retaliated with another Mana Bolt, though the Daemon dodged it. They were getting closer, giving them less time to dodge but better accuracy on their own attacks.

A swirling shield of Water Mana appeared in front of the mages, a young woman in heavy armor standing behind them with her arms outstretched. The shield moved as she did, intercepting several attacks and letting the mages cast their Skills with no interruption. David

focused on mimicking her, blocking for the archers who were pelting the remaining three Daemons with Skilled shots.

A few of the Daemon's attacks got through, no matter what he and the others could do, leaving burns, cuts, and lowered Hit Points for the healers to deal with. David blocked a beam that would have hit Lisa, but doing so made him take an Air Slash into his right leg. A cool feeling enveloped him for a second, and he saw Liz with her hand outstretched towards him. He nodded in thanks, then moved again to protect the others.

After a minute, David risked a glance at the forest line, and saw the dozen armed and armored beasts slowly making their way out of the trees. They formed a shield line and began marching, and were finally close enough for him to examine them.

Name: Daemon Legionnaire

Level: 7

Description: An evolved form of the lowly Grunt. Legionnaires are capable of following complex commands and utilizing advanced battlefield weapons and tactics. Extremely dangerous in large numbers.

The last of the Incubi fell, and a mass of Grunts erupted from the trees at the same time. They burst ahead of the steadily marching Legionnaires, hooting like the deranged gorillas some of them resembled. With the long ranged attacks gone, David pushed nearly four hundred Mana into a Mana Bolt. He took a few seconds to aim once it was formed, then released it at the centermost Legionnaire. The highly overcharged, fully Metal Mana Bolt slammed into its shield, obliterating its protection before shooting straight through the Daemon. David saw the thing collapse as a full quarter of its torso vanished under the discharge of his Skill.

"Awesome shot!" Lisa exclaimed. "Let me beat it!"

David felt the Energy and Mana she used. Energy to reinforce the bow, strengthening the string and enhancing how far back she could pull it and its tension when she did so. Mana enveloped the arrow, a bright blue Mana that he thought was Air coating the tip and surrounding the shaft while the deep green of Wood Mana sank into the shaft. She took a deep breath and held it, then released. A flash of Mana came from her arms as she activated yet another Skill before the arrow exploded away from the wall.

The Daemon's used some sort of Skill themselves, a blurry gray form of energy forming around their shields as they stepped together. David's attack had apparently surprised them, but they were ready for Lisa's. The arrow burst against the shield, the Air Mana forming a small vortex that caused it to dim. David threw another overcharged Mana Bolt at it, and the other archer shot an arrow enhanced with Fire Mana.

The mages were bombarding the Grunts and Alphas, while the melee fighters either shielded their comrades or used their own, weaker, ranged attacks. David kept his shield up, warily watching the Grunt Alphas out of the corner of his eye while sending Bolts at the steadily closing in Legionnaires.

He quickly repositioned to the left of Lisa to deflect a beam attack from the nearest Alpha. The beam had a rusting quality to it. It was different from the decay of the Wargs, but it still worked to dissolve through his shield. The Metal Mana was almost instantly destroyed, the

opposite of before, but the Earth Mana held on. David quickly reinforced his shield, pushing Mana at the maximum rate he could through his channels.

The beam lasted eight seconds before abruptly cutting out. David chanced a look to see the attacking Alpha stumble with an arrow in its eye, then collapse bonelessly to the ground. The Legionnaires were two-thirds of the way to the wall when four of the remaining eleven stepped backward and slammed their shields into the ground. They drew crossbows from their backs, and the twang of their bows drowned out the screams of the Grunts.

David interposed himself between one of them and Lisa, then grunted in pain as the crossbow bolt shattered his shield, his Mana Shield Skill, and stabbed into his gut. He grabbed and pulled it out, since it only sank in about a centimeter, and sent Energy only to his Advanced Bodily Repair Skill to seal the cut up. A quick glance showed that one bolt had shaved off nine hundred Hit Points after going through both his defensive Skills. *Need to strengthen them both. And Strengthen too*, he thought while resummoning his Mana-Artifact shield.

A scream from his right showed one of the mages collapse, then bolt nearly ripping his arm off. Liz and a young man both Sprinted to his side, their magics glowing as they sought to stop the bleeding. Steve had a bolt stabbed into his leg, but he just ignored it. He grinned back at them, a ball appearing in his hand. He threw the item like it was a baseball and he was the pitcher. It ran into the Legionnaires' shield and dropped to the ground. The closest one grinned and Steve winked.

The ball detonated two seconds later, and the shield had passed by it already. The grinning Daemon was blown backward, and the two next to him were knocked sideways. The Skill they were using immediately shattered, and the three mages and two archers attacked the suddenly exposed enemies. The centermost Daemon tried to get to his feet, but his shadow manifested itself and began strangling him instead. *Go Aly!*

The crossbow wielding Daemons were the first target of the renewed offensive. "Bring'em down," David Shouted, refreshing his main buffing Skill. He put his actions where his words were and shot out a Mana Bolt at a reloading Daemon. Three of the four went down hard, but one managed to avoid every attack thrown at him and retaliated with a bolt that shattered David's Skills yet again. This time it drove into his shoulder, penetrating far enough that his arm dropped as muscles and tendons were cut.

With a scream, he ripped it out, doing significantly more damage on the way out than it did on the way in, but his Pain Resistance kept him functional and his strong regeneration Skill began fixing the injury quickly. The Daemon dodged another Water missile, then jerked as a Lightning Mana Bolt from Colin electrocuted it. In the two seconds it was stuck in place, it took three arrows, a Fireball, and a Wood Spike.

The Legionnaires Sprinted straight at the wall, knowing that they were done for now but trying desperately to take some of the humans out with them. They screamed in anger and panic, only to turn into cries of pain as they ran onto a Spike Field from David and a quagmire of mud that was surrounded by spiraling blades of Air. Shadows and vines attacked them from the ground, and the last of the Daemons was killed only sixteen steps from the wall. He had tried to leap, but a vine had wrapped his leg and drug him to the ground before he could gather his strength.

David looked around and saw the young healer working on the injured mage. He rushed over and checked his Mana and Energy. *Down to fifteen hundred in each. These guys must be*

running on empty, he thought, then put his hand on the man's back. With a thought, he dumped most of each of his resources into the healer, giving him a hundred something back. David got dizzy for a few seconds before his regeneration brought them back over a few hundred.

The young man looked up at him and said, "Thank you, sir," before turning back to his patient. He used the gifted Mana quickly while also bandaging up the wound with a glimmering bright green cloth bandage.

"No problem, thanks for taking care of them," David responded before looking out at the field. Aly was down there looting the dead Daemons. They dissolved into Essence, but they left their armor and weapons behind.

"These crossbows would be useful," she told him through their communication system. He saw her heft one up. "Not too heavy. I'm glad we didn't have to fight these guys in the forest though."

"Yeah. Saving the elk helped save us in turn," David laughed.

She turned, loaded a bolt, then launched it into the ground fifty meters away. "Awesome. Come on down."

David checked on the others. Liz was treating Steve, who was laughing at something Colin said. Lisa and the other archer were talking to the middle-aged man holding a massive shield while he ran a glowing rock over the top of it. The dents in the shield slowly fixed themselves, though the rock itself got smaller each second. David nodded to himself, then leaped off the walls and headed over to Aly.

"What'd you want me to see?" David asked.

"This armor might fit you," she nudged one with her foot. "It might be worth trying to stack armor with our suit."

"I'll try, but I thought we couldn't," he said with a shrug. He lifted the breastplate first, glad that the Essence Wave made bodies dissolve without smell. He then put the torso armor on, sliding it over his head like a shirt.

Warning! Incompatible armor equipped. The Legionnaire Breastplate you have equipped is incompatible with your Mana-Augmented Power Suit and will interfere with proper functioning. Do you wish to dissolve Legionnaire Breastplate to accumulate 50 Essence towards upgrading your Mana-Augmented Power Suit? Yes/No

"Well, we can't wear these," David said, "but we can use them to upgrade our nanosuits. Eventually anyway. I'd need twenty thousand of the breastplates, or maybe five thousand total suits?"

"Neat, so we can convert credits into Essence for our armor," Aly said with a grin. "First we should see if anyone else wants these, though."

"Yeah, not worth it right now," David said, pulling the breastplate off. He threw five of the sets of platemail armor into his storage belt before he couldn't fit anything else in. Aly copied him, getting four sets, and they hauled the other three over to the wall.

"Anyone on the other side?" Aly yelled.

"You're clear," Lisa shouted back.

Aly nodded, then threw a helmet over, followed by the rest of the armor. David did a standing jump to the top of the wall, activating Strengthen to give him enough boost, then

stepped off and dumped the two sets he was carrying into a pile. He then caught the boot Aly had just thrown at him, followed by kicking the parts already thrown over into the pile. The rest of the armor he'd stored got poured out on top of it, and Aly jumped over the wall after him.

"Anyone want some Daemon armor?" David called out. "We should be able to adjust it at the Smithy for you if it doesn't fit now."

"Ooh, me!" Steve said, leaping off the wall and rushing over like a kid headed for a candy store. They helped him find a set, his massive shoulders helping. The final result hung on him a bit, but he just laughed it off. "Hah, I didn't have enough credits for both a weapon and armor. Now I am invincible!"

"Awesome," David said, then turned to the defender who had walked up. "You as well?"

"I like my armor, sir," he said, "but this looks stronger." The man was wearing a chainmail shirt and an open helm.

"If nothing else, the helmet should protect you better, and the boots and gloves would give you some more protection," David said, forgetting the words for that type of armor. "What's your name?"

"I'm Liam," he said, "nice to meet you, sir."

"Come on," David gestured. "Feel free to grab whatever you need. Same for the rest of you! If you want to just grab a leg thing or wrist armor, do so. We'll divvy up what's left after everyone gets what they need."

The rest of the team dove on them like locusts, though most only grabbed a single piece of armor. Lisa walked off with a vambrace, while the other archer put on a pair of sabatons. He wiggled his toes a bit, then took them off with a grimace before shoving them in a bag. "I need better shoes," he said. "But I'll have to get these worked on before they don't catch and bind," he said.

After the feeding frenzy, Liz came over. "What are we going to do about the rescued prisoners?"

"Escort them back to Hope's Refuge," David said. "Have we heard from the other teams?"

"No, not yet," she said with a frown. "I hope we hear from them soon."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Seneschal,” David called, “let me know as soon as you hear from the other teams, please.”

“Of course,” Josiah replied.

David turned to Liz and Aly. “The refugees need to rest,” Liz said. “We pushed them hard and they were neglected and malnourished.”

“Okay,” David nodded. “I’m going to meditate for a while, then. I’m close to Apprentice in several Skills, and I’m going to try to drive them over the edge. Tell me when it’s been two hours?”

“Sure,” Aly said. “I’m going to hunt, see about bringing down a deer or a few rabbits or something. No elk though.”

“Yup, no elk,” David laughed. “If you meet them again, though, you should continue to build rapport.”

She reached over and ruffled his hair. “Of course,” she said, rolling her eyes at him.

Colin just shook his head and walked off, while Liz turned towards the closest Farm. David waved at them, then dove into his core cave. “Okay,” he said aloud, “Shield and Sword Mastery. Shield is closest.” He moved to the quasi-office that his Inscribing Scholar’s Focus Skill had placed just to the side of the surface, such that it was, of his core cave.

He looked around, once again marveling at the ridiculousness of the Essence Wave. “Why do I feel like I’m mixing the worst parts of a LitRPG Apocalypse novel with a xianxia web-novel?” He laughed, looking at his cores. “I could cultivate, and then find some young master to face slap.” He laughed for a few seconds, then shook his head, “Okay, time to focus.”

With an effort of will, he brought up his motions to block the Imps attacks, examining each movement and use of Energy. He found hundreds of tiny imperfections, slight shifts where he could have moved a minuscule amount differently and have deflected the attack better or prevented a fraction of the damage from impacting him.

On a whim, he focused on the wall behind himself, imagining a door. He pressed, feeling a resistance, but he pushed at it, forcing the image on the wall. After a few subjective minutes, his head was pounding, but a door slowly appeared. At first it was indistinct, but he didn’t stop. He grabbed Mana from his core, then Energy, and pushed them into the mental construct. Another few minutes, and the door snapped in place. He pictured a large training room with training dummies behind it.

The drain on his Mana and Energy quadrupled, and then doubled after that. His mental avatar dropped to its knees, a migraine that shattered his conscious connection to it crashing into him as both his Energy and Mana bottomed out.

It took him a few seconds, during which his Mana and Energy regenerated, for him to notice that his Hit Points had dropped by almost five hundred. A flashing notification distracted him from the pain that was still stabbing into his brain.

Congratulations! You have forcibly advanced your Skill: Inscribing Scholar’s Focus [R]. It has evolved to Scholar’s True Focus [Epic]! Level increased!

Name: Scholar's True Focus [Epic]

Level: Apprentice 1

Description: Enter a meditative state, increasing regenerations and allowing for review of all Skill usage in the last day. Skills so examined have an increased level gain afterward. Can review all known inscription symbols and attempt combinations. Able to use Mana and Energy to power mental constructs, training yourself with the insights gained by the Skill. Use Energy and Mana to modify your core cave by adding or changing already placed rooms.

Rooms Placed: Study - increased focus and Skill level gain for mental and magical Skills

Training Room - increased focus and Skill level gain for physical Skills. Two practice dummies will come to life and fight at your Skill level.

"That's cool," he whispered to himself, then engaged Advanced Bodily Repair to reduce the pounding of his head. After a few minutes of just lying on the ground, he finally got enough focus to dive back into his core cave.

Once there, the pounding that had devolved into a dull roar dropped away. He checked and saw that his Shield Mastery had improved to Apprentice One. "Alright!" He said. "Halfway there. Woah oh, living on a pray-er!" With a laugh, he sang a few verses from a song he enjoyed. "Now it's time-ime for Sword Mastery-ee. No, that, that was bad. And I'm punch-drunk or something. Let's try out my new mental room thingy."

He shook his mental head, then moved through the study to the training room. The training room was ten meters by ten meters. The floor was the kind of gym mat you'd find in the most upscale gym in your town. Every wall was a mirror, and the dummies he'd imagined had turned into two wooden people, reminiscent of the crash-test dummies used in car development.

He pulled up his mental view of the last fight he used his sword, focusing on how he cut into the Grunt Alphas. Every movement was examined, every twitch critiqued. When he was done, he looked over at one of the dummies. It'd changed into a Grunt Alpha, then bounded at him. Its claws slashed at him, and all he could do was dive to the side.

His sword appeared in his hands, the perfect mixture of Earth, Metal, and pure Mana. The Alpha swung its hand at him, and he responded by deflecting the attack over his head, swinging a slicing cut as a reflection of the attack. His blade sliced through the fake Daemon's throat, dropping it to the ground. David panted for a few seconds, then turned to the other dummy.

There were two, again, and they both turned into Alphas and jumped to attack him. He fought desperately, unable to activate any of his Skills, until his sword stabbed into the last standing Alpha's mouth, dropping it to the floor. He was covered in cuts and bruises, which faded from his mental body and memory very quickly.

"That was fun!" He exclaimed. A quick check showed his Sword Mastery Skill had reached Beginner 20, just on the cusp of advancing. "I love that I can train in my own mind, and it counts!" He said. He tried to summon another Alpha, but he'd tapped out that particular memory. He searched back in his mind, and then went over the battle with the Harvester.

Two minutes of subjective time later, and his mental body was reforming in the training room. He'd been ripped apart and then eaten, but he got a few ideas of sword movements and footwork that would help him better dodge the pounce of something ten times his size. He turned back to the dummies, and they morphed into the Harvester yet again.

He screamed out, then yelled at the dummies, "I've fought the thing five times, and still can't last more than three minutes! Why?! This is crazy!" Sitting down, he put his head in his hands and breathed deeply for a bit. "Of course I can't beat the thing alone, with no Skill but Sword Mastery. We barely beat it when there were the four of us and a dozen leveled-up elk. Why am I beating myself up about this?"

He checked his Skill, and it had dinged, leveling to Apprentice 2 while he watched. "Alright! I've got six of the required eight Apprentice Skills to advance. I have two Skill Stone choices available too. Do I want to use them on something that is close and guarantee the advancement, or do I pick the hardest to level Skills to push ahead with the stones?"

For a couple of minutes, he sat in the chair in the study and debated with himself. Finally, he came to a conclusion, "Staying alive and being able to keep going will help the most. So, let's work on Advanced Bodily Repair and Earth's Unrelenting Motion." With a few mental gymnastics, he summoned both Skill Stones into his hands, even though he wasn't cognizant of his physical body.

A single thought activated the Advanced Bodily Repair stone, and he found himself dangling in a black void. A slice of pain, and his left leg was sliced away. "Heal yourself," a voice commanded. David focused on his body, directing the healing Energy and Mana to his leg. He guided it as it built out his bones, muscles, tendons, skin, and Mana and Energy channels.

Immediately after he finished fixing his leg, a blade of something cut his right arm off. "Heal yourself," the same voice boomed across the void.

After his right arm, he lost his right leg, then his left arm. Each time, he had to rebuild them as they were. The blade cut out his kidney, and then his intestine. Over and over he lost body parts, each time requiring quick thinking and specific guidance to fix the damaged pieces. The last two were the hardest.

The second to last had the entirety of the front of his throat ripped out. He had to quickly rebuild the arteries and veins before he bled out, then he had to rebuild his breathing tube before he suffocated. Finally, he fixed the rest, taking deep gasping breaths.

Four breaths in, and his heart was cut out of his chest. He frantically rebuilt his heart while also forcing Mana and Energy throughout his entire circulatory system, replacing his need for oxygen until the heart repair was complete. Then he lost his heart and lungs at the same time. After that, he had to replace every organ. He failed this one the first time, and the second time, and the third time. Each time, he realized that he had to maintain a number of organs' effects while also repairing them in a critical order. Finally, on his seventeenth attempt, he correctly healed everything in the right order while sustaining his brain and body in the meantime.

Once he finished the last challenge, he reappeared in his core cave. His mental projection just collapsed, laying flat on the spongy mat and breathing deeply. David just shivered for a few subjective minutes, trying to process the horror of the last however long that took. "Was it worth it?" he whined to himself, opening his Status and checking. "Apprentice five. I'll take it."

He struggled to his feet, staggering slightly, and sent a wave of Energy through his body. The Energy fixed and calmed his nerves, reducing the inflammation in his head and soothing the aches he'd developed from tensing muscles too tightly. "I could get used to this," he laughed. "Okay. Earth's Unrelenting Motion Skill Stone. Please don't be as bad."

With a thought, he activated the next Skill Stone. He found himself drifting in space without a body, just a point of perspective. A massive planet spun beneath him, moving far too quickly to be real. Something streaked out of the blackness, a vast beam of green energy that splashed over the planet. Immediately, the planet slowed, its rotation and translation through space disrupted by whatever the beam was.

A deep brown, dark enough to seem black at times, slowly extruded from the planet's surface. Well, it seemed slow, but it covered his vision nearly instantly. The beam fought against it, but the deepest brown was inevitable. The Earth Energy proved unrelenting, driving the attacking beam away. The planet's motion never stopped. Once the opposing force was removed, the planet's rotation restored itself to its full speed.

"Understand!" A voice boomed.

The scene repeated itself several times, and David tried to imprint upon his mind every bit of it. Something profound was happening, with both the beam of energy trying to slow the planet and its response being full of deeper meaning. *The Earth is always moving*, he thought, *but it's more than that. I think ...* he mentally trailed off, not able to put the sudden surge in understanding into words.

He then found himself standing in a hallway. The door in front of him, only a dozen meters away, said exit. David looked around, and shrugged. "Won't be that easy, but okay," he said, then started to jog forward. After only a few steps, a familiar beam of green energy shot out from above the door.

Every muscle in his body tensed up, and his next step forward took almost twice as much energy as it should have. The feeling got worse slowly, to where the fifth step was taking three times as much. He grit his teeth and bent into the beam, as it started to feel like a hurricane force breeze shoving him backward.

"This isn't working. Energy, I'm supposed to use Energy somehow," he said, as he slid backward a meter. The push dropped away quickly as he was shoved down the hallway. He started walking forward again, trying to direct Energy across his skin like the planet had across its surface.

He flew back down the hallway, landing on his butt for the fifth time in a row. "Okay, not that way," he said. "Maybe I need to spin the Energy?" He started to spin it as he exuded it out of his skin. The resulting shear threw him into the wall, and then drove him backward yet again.

Finally, after the seventh attempt at that, he just sat down and thought. "So, the planet spun the Energy, but that didn't work for me. Why?" He talked to himself. "The planet itself was spinning. Is that the key? Do I need to direct the Energy to mimic my motion?"

He sprung to his feet, then stepped forward. He focused on pushing his Energy to his skin, and then flinging it forward with every step. When the beam hit him, it was deflected off the Energy, and by projecting it along his plane of motion, he prevented the beam from throwing him backward. It took him nearly twenty minutes to walk the full distance, each step deliberate and slow so the Energy would flow right, but he made it. He opened the door, and found himself back in his core cave.

"Apprentice one," David said. "I made it. Barely in that case, so I must have missed something. Oh well, that works for me, because I've got this notification now!"

Congratulations on completing Global Quest: Become an Apprentice!
Reward: You are now an Apprentice! Every Skill used on someone of a lower Tier than yourself will receive a ~~small~~ lesser increase in effectiveness. Increases with the number of Tiers below you they are. Additional ~~miniscule~~ small increase in all Skills efficiency and power!
Global Quest Received: Become a Journeyman

Congratulations! You are the first person on your world to reach the Apprentice Tier! You are the third person in your quadrant to reach the Apprentice Tier!
Rewards: 1000 Essence! Small increase changed to lesser. Miniscule changed to small! Tiny increase in leveling all Skills through the Apprentice Tier!

Global Quest Received: Become a Journeyman
Requirements: Walk 6 Journeyman Ways (1/6), 6 Skills at Journeyman 1+ (0/6), Level 12+

"Totally worth it!" David said, coming out of his core cave. He looked around and saw Colin practicing his Berserker's Leap Skill. "I did it!" He shouted to him. "I finished the Apprentice Quest. Now I got to get my Skills higher. Again."

"You know," Colin said when he jogged over. "I get the feeling that we're leveling and getting Ways done faster than normal. You know, since our Skills are lagging so far behind the rest of the requirements from these quests?"

"Could be," David said. "Maybe most people on other planets don't fight as many Daemons as we do, or something?"

"It could be that children are trained in Skills to a much higher extent," Colin said. "I mean, it's only been a few weeks that we've had access to the System. If we had it since we were children, don't you think we'd have a few Skills higher? Even if they improve slower if you don't have life or death fights?"

"Good point," David said. "Well, what Skills do you need to get to Apprentice?"

He looked over his Status again. "Berserker's Leap is close, as is Power Attack and Strengthen. Lightning Strike is my newest Beginner Skill and I want it higher too."

"Well, I can work on Mana Shield, Power Attack, and Combat Reflexes while you do those," David said. "Now bring it."

Colin shook his head, then Leaped away. He landed with a puff of dirt, turned around, and Leaped back at David. The crash of his halberd smashing into David's shield drew gazes from the other's in the fortification, especially from two of the rescued people. They watched in trepidation, horror, and awe as the two high level people bashed at each other, sending each other crashing to the ground or flying through the air over and over again.

The occasional blood spray from a hit that got through their defenses just made the overly enthusiastic fighters laugh, and further cemented in the mind of the watchers not to mess with them. Things grew worse for them when Liz joined in, healing injuries and causing them in equal measure. Colin finally collapsed, exhausted, and left David and Liz sending ranged Mana attacks at each other for another ten minutes before she shook her head. "Your regeneration is insane," she said. "You need to work on your spike damage. I can't imagine what it'll be like."

"Thanks," he said. "Good call on that."

“What happened here?” Aly asked, walking in the north gate hauling two partially-dressed deer carcasses. “Also, help with these?”

“I can help,” the male archer from the wall said, rushing over. “I’m building towards a ranger-like build. Used to hunt with my dad.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Show me how, once they give an explanation?”

“We were just sparring,” David said.

Aly threw her head back, looking into the sky and shaking her head, “Why me? Ugh” she paused for a second, then sighed. “Come on, let’s learn how to dress a deer.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Man, that was gross, David thought as he washed deer blood and guts off of him, pouring a bucket of water from the well that formed next to the keep over his head. Luckily, his armor kept the mess from soaking into clothing, and let it all just sluice off.

After getting clean, he went into the keep, looking at the slumped over figures of the rescuees. "Are you all ready to move out again?" David asked.

The young woman who volunteered to be first looked up at him. "No, but we can if we need to."

"I'd rather get you all to our main settlement," David said. "There's better housing, food, and clothing there. Mostly, though, safety." He turned to Steve, who was working the kitchen, cooking the meat from the deer Aly'd brought back. "How long?"

"Ten minutes," he answered. "Then let them eat. We'll keep watch and eat after."

"Good," he said, then he turned back to the girl. "I'm sorry, I never introduced myself. I am David." He held out a hand to shake hers.

"I know, Lord Black?" she asked carefully. "I'm Suzan."

"David's fine," he laughed. "I'm only the lord because I was closest to the crystal."

"I just didn't want to deal with the headaches," Colin said as he walked in.

"So you're not an alien?" A middle-aged man asked.

"No, though we did meet one," David said, then explained what happened to them right before the Essence Wave hit. Questions flew at him, and he ended up telling everything else leading up to them showing up like avenging angels, saving the listening people.

"Thank you," Suzan said.

"What were they making you do?" David asked.

"Expanding the Corruption," the healer answered. "It turned our Mana and Energy into more of itself. We were taught," she shuddered for a second, "how to make the Corruption rather than destroy it."

"If we didn't learn fast enough, we were whipped," Suzan added. "Those who couldn't take it, or just were a little too slow, died under those whips."

David turned to the healer, "Thank you," he paused.

"Andrea," she said helpfully.

"Andrea, for the information." He thought for a moment, "Is there any place that you saw that would be important, or that held more slaves? How many of you were there?"

"A few hundred at least," a young man said. "I'm Mason. Before I was working with this team, I was made to help out building stone buildings. A few humans were working with the Daemons. Helping them. One was an old bully. He found out my name and amused himself, and the lead Daemon, by making me become a stonemason. I was on a team that built barracks for the other humans to live in. There were ten buildings made, each holding forty people or so, but I don't know if they were going to pack us in like sardines or something either."

He rambled on for a minute, and David let him. He found out that the lead Daemon was roughly four meters tall, massively muscular, and had a terrifying face, like a mixture of a rottweiler and an ant. Patches of chitin covered it like armor, and it had a pair of insect wings that let it fly for short distances. Finally, he petered out, a haunted expression on his face.

"Looks like dinner is ready," David said finally. He looked around at the hopeful and tired faces. "You're safe now, and we'll figure out a way to save all the others too."

Colin and Steve handed out hunks of deer meat, pulling paper plates out of their storage belts. *That's an idea*, David thought, then shook his head. They ate quickly, then cleaned up. Aly leaned against his side for most of dinner, then left a bit earlier than everyone else to scout the way.

"Seneschal, we're bringing the refugees back to Hope's Refuge. Is a bridge available to get us across the river?" he asked.

"Lord, not yet, but we can get one done before you get back," Josiah said. "I'll get a team put on it immediately."

"Thanks. We'll want to start on a road to the fortification here, too," David said.

"Got it. We already started one to Salida's Revenge. Just the simplest gravel path the System lets us build," he answered. A pause showed he was speaking to someone else. "The bridge will be up in a bit over two hours. Stay safe. We still haven't heard from any of the other teams."

David sighed, then turned to the others. "Let's go."

The journey back was relatively quiet. No Daemons showed up, and only a few animals were seen. Dozens more were heard, running away from the loud group of tromping people, though. David and his team often lifted one or two of the struggling refugees and let them have piggyback rides or carry them for a few hundred meters, letting them catch their breath.

Finally, after nearly seven hours of hiking, Dylan popped out from behind a tree, nearly causing David to have a heart attack. "Hiyah, boss," he said with a grin.

"Evening, Dylan," David growled back. "You're lucky I'm carrying Suzan here, or I might have blown your head off."

He had the grace to grimace. "Sorry, just wanted to turn you a bit. Our road starts a dozen meters behind me. You would have missed it otherwise."

"Thanks," David said.

Aly appeared beside him, "Though, next time you might want to announce yourself before appearing."

He screamed and jumped sideways, then shook his head sheepishly. "You got better. Come on. You should be able to make it back to the city by the time the sun sets."

True to his word, twenty steps past him, they left the forest to walk onto a gravel road. One of Steve's buddies, Jack, was hauling a one meter cubed stone block to the end, which was only five meters to David's right. He gently set down Suzan, then walked over to where another few people were working.

Summer was there and seemed to be gently coaxing a tree ahead of them to move itself out of the way. As he watched, the tree's roots withdrew from where the road would go, and the whole thing slowly shifted about a meter. She slumped, her Mana and Energy going to the tree to allow its unnatural movement. To the other side, Jennifer the woodcutter was swinging an ax and felling another tree.

David stepped forward and caught the tree. "Where do I take it?"

"Lord Black," Jack exclaimed. "Uh, I've been hauling them back to the base of the Refuge. Barry is there and hauls them up to the Woodcutter's Hut. He's been hauling these

blocks down, and I carry them back then smash'em. Seneschal Josiah hasn't built a second hut yet, though he's said that he plans on it soon."

"Well, I'm heading there anyway," David said. "What happens to the stump?"

"Building the road grinds it up," Jennifer said. "Probably takes extra Energy, but I'm not running low anytime soon. Mana's more of an issue, hence why we get the blocks delivered. Smashing the rocks saves a bunch of Energy for little effort, though."

Jack set the rock down right in front of the current gravel line, then picked up a massive sledgehammer that David just noticed. With a grunt, he swung it in a vertical circle, the tip glowing with Energy for a second before a Power Attack shattered the stone. All of the pieces flew away from everyone, showing Jack's control of his swing.

"You are doing a great job," David said. "Do you have someone on watch?"

"Dylan is scouting for us," Jack said. "And we all have our weapons, just in case."

"Well, I'll leave you to it," he nodded at them.

Suzan was staring wide eyed as the edge of the road crept outwards, shaking her head. "Amazing," she said.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Dylan said. "But I'm going back on watch again."

"Take care," Aly said to all of them, then turned down the road and started to walk. The refugees smiled to see a road, even if it was gravel, and noticed the slight buoyant effect the System-generated structure had on their feet. Even just the fact that they didn't have to constantly watch their footing made it easier on them.

The road was only a few hundred meters long, and the trees surrounding them quickly gave way to a small grassy area. In front of them, the road continued to a large, arching stone and wood bridge. At the other end, at least thirty people were sitting slumped over around a small fire, still resting from the herculean effort to get the bridge done quickly.

Josiah and Michelle stood on the path, obviously waiting for them. When they got close, both of them turned to David and saluted with their hands to their chest. Just behind them, a few other people waited, all holding piles of clothing or platters of food. Off to their left, nearly five hundred meters away, a large double Log House was in the final stages of construction.

Michelle stepped forward and addressed the newcomers, "Welcome to the city of Hope's Refuge. We've taken the time to prepare some food and new clothing for you. Please, grab whatever you wish, then follow me to a place where you can get some beds. Tomorrow, we will spend some time figuring out what all you can do, and what you want to do, to help out around here."

"Thank you," Suzan said, stepping forward and taking her role as the leader of the small group. She turned to David, then, Colin, Liz, and Aly. "Thank you." She said to each of them. "We won't ever be able to say it enough times, but thank you."

"Do your best to help out and be there for each other and the city. That is thanks enough," David said.

The refugees followed Michelle and Suzan away, each one of them thanking the four on their way past. Once they were a few meters away, Josiah gestured for them to follow him. "Come on," he said. They started the hike to the summit of their tiny plateau, quickly moving into a run that ate the distance quite quickly. In less than a minute, they managed to make it all the way to the top.

When they reached the Mayor's Manor, Josiah led them to the map room. "Okay. So I finally heard from team two. They lost two members and were chased for a long time before they could get loose, but they managed to destroy a warehouse that stored something important. They were chased by the Daemon Lord itself, which is what killed the two. They stayed behind to distract and hold it up, letting the others escape once it proved impossible for them to outdistance it."

"Crap," David said. "What about teams one and three?"

"Nothing yet," Josiah said with a frown. "We may have to write them off, which, we don't have enough people as it is. Getting the twenty refugees you found won't make up for losing twenty two trained people."

"Seneschal, Lord, this is Team One," Craig's voice cut through their ears. "We need assistance. I've got ten injured civilians and five injured teammates. We're free of the Daemons, but lost. Team Three is on the way to us, but they're all injured and down a few personnel too. Can you send a group to the northwest after us? Please include a healer or three."

"This is Lord Black," David responded. "A team will be put together and sent immediately."

"Oh, thank you!" Craig nearly cried.

"Use your Essence, and encourage the civilians to do so as well," Josiah said. "Then focus on your healing Skills. We're coming." Josiah turned to Aly and Liz. "Can you two take a group out? David, you need to stay for a bit to work with the city System. Colin, you can either go with Aly and Liz or go help the road construction out to the fortification. We need that done if we want to have a shot at taking Buena Vista back from the Daemons."

Colin looked at Liz, who said, "If they've got both teams together or nearby, that should be plenty of people for safety. Aly and I can find them, get them on their feet, and back quickly."

"Then I'll help with the road," Colin said. "Stone blocks out, trees back, right?"

"Yes sir," Josiah said, "but same command to you all. Use your Essence before anything else."

"Considering I have almost five and a half thousand, yeah I should spend some," David said. "I'll go through this and we can talk in a bit."

"I will help Michelle get the newbies situated," Josiah said, "and get some more items prepped for the others incoming."

David nodded, then moved to the corner and sat where two chairs had been set down. Another two were in each corner, giving the room a bit more of a finished feel. With a thought, he pulled up his available Ways list.

Protector (0/500), Runner (0/500), Berserker (0/500), Scout (0/500), Mage II (0/500) Shield Beginner (0/1000), Leader III (0/3000), City Knight (0/3000), Augmented (0/10000), Frontliner (0/1000), Shieldwall (0/1000), Scholar III (0/2000), Vanguard III (0/1500), Earth Mage III (0/1500), Body Temperer (0/2000), Metal Mage II (0/1000), Cultivator (0/10000), Swimmer (0/500), Omnicaster II(0/3000), Beast Leader (0/1500), Mana Artificer (0/3000), Baron I (0/2500), Apprentice (0/1500), Skill Evolver (0/3000), Complete Regenerator (0/3500), Unstoppable Earth (0/2000)

Huh, some new ones there. I need five more at two thousand or twenty-five hundred Essence. Maybe the three thousand ones too? I don't know. Either way, though, I've got two more levels still before I could advance my tier anyway, so let's look at all options instead of just the big ones. Beginner is still an option, maybe get some upgrades to Power Attack and Mana Bolt, but I've got Apprentice now too. Leader three might be good for the two leader Skills, maybe make it so A Leader's Due isn't so hard to use. Man, I really need to train that Skill.

David sat in thought, going through all the Ways before deciding, *Scholar three. Start there. Scholar's Focus, through its various incarnations, has been the best thing for my advancement so far. This should hopefully help push it forward. I hope.*

He mentally triggered his Status, then started to feed Essence into the Scholar III Way. Throughout the process, he gained six Intelligence, and that was it. Amusingly enough, that equalized his Mana and Energy pools. The midway bonus was a buff to Scholar's Vision, giving him the ability to see an enemy's weakness, if they have one, to a specific Mana or Energy type. He was mostly excited by the confirmation that he could potentially upgrade his Energy Skills with Metal or Earth aspects. *Sometime, gotta focus on that*, he thought.

The completion bonus, though, was what he hoped for.

Congratulations! You have Walked the Way of the Scholar thrice! Your focus and dedication to knowledge is unparalleled in your world, letting you stand tall! You possess an Epic evolution of Scholar's Focus that has already evolved before!

Reward: Upgrade to Scholar's True Focus [Epic] - You will now be able to simulate with perfect clarity every opponent you have defeated in your training room. New Inscription Workshop added, test potential combinations at or below your Skill level. Results are not guaranteed to be perfectly accurate. Higher Skill levels will improve accuracy. Additional options enabled for your core cave. Focus inward to stand taller outside yourself.

Nice! Now, I've got twenty five hundred more Essence into Ways before I have enough to level. Should I just walk the Baron Way? Would that really be useful now, though? Technically I'm a Baron, but there's no way we have more than two thousand people total now. Mana Artificer would let me do more things with Mana Inscription, I'm sure. Complete Regenerator would be ridiculous. I wonder how it would change Advanced Bodily Repair? But it might be a Practitioner instead of Journeyman Way. Skill Evolver might let me do a bunch more changes like Advanced Bodily Repair, forcing two or more Skills together. But the one that really calls out to me is Body Temperer. I got that when I overstressed my channels, and they got stronger as a result. I have so much Mana and Energy that I cannot use it all. If it lets me use even a bit more, it'd be worth it.

Two thousand Essence flowed into my System. The stat gains from the way were equally divided between Intelligence, Constitution, and Strength, two to each.

His Minor Muscle Efficiency Skill received the first buff from the Way.

Congratulations, your Skill: Minor Muscle Efficiency has been improved!

Skill: Minor Muscle Efficiency

Level: Beginner 1

Description: Increase the effect of each point of base Strength by a negligible amount.

Increased effectiveness with Skill Level. Increase the effect of each point of base Dexterity by a microscopic amount.

Beginner Bonus: Reduces required recovery time after extreme exertion by a negligible amount per point of base Constitution.

Oh, nice, improved Dexterity, though by an even smaller descriptor. So underneath miniscule is negligible and then microscopic. Interesting. I wonder if there is one even smaller? Planck lengthian? Is that even a word? Eh, let's keep going. The second one, though, was where the money was.

Gain the Body Tempering Skill

Level: Not Applicable (not able to level within System)

Description: Application of Mana and Energy to your channels in a specific manner will improve your ability to channel either resource. A common-level technique will be provided with this Skill.

The influx of data into his brain dropped David in his chair. He slumped over, falling unconscious from information overload.

"David!" Josiah exclaimed, rushing over from where he was examining the map.

Only a few seconds later, David stirred. "Ow," he said, bending over and holding his head.

"What happened?" Josiah asked, keeping his voice low for David's sake.

"Finished a Way. It gave me a new Skill, only it was more, uh, directed. I got a common Body Tempering technique inserted into my brain and now I just want to lay down," David said.

"Body tempering?"

"Yeah, it's a way, heh, of using my Mana and Energy to make my channels stronger. You know, so I can actually use the ridiculous regeneration rates I've got," David said with a grin.

"Well, how long will it take to use it?"

"Uh," David focused, trying to bring up the memory. After a bit, he looked up. "About one more Mana or Energy per ten minutes of usage for every hour of continuous tempering. Wow, that's going to take forever."

"So just level it up," Josiah said. "Should get better."

"No can do, this Skill doesn't have levels," David said. "But the notification said I was provided a common technique, so ostensibly there are better ones."

"Might be able to find one in the Market, or if there is another level of the Way you walked."

"Or maybe sometime we'll end up in contact with other peoples fighting the Daemons, and we can trade directly with them," David said. He channeled a bit of Mana and Energy through his healing Skill. After thirty seconds, his head stopped pounding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"There are a number of things I need you to do that I can't," Josiah said. "At least, until you delegate authority for them. First off, I can't pay anyone out of the city funds."

"Well that's not good," David said, stepping up to the map. He activated the City System, and saw hundreds of pending notifications. "Uh."

"Yeah, that," Josiah said. "We want to get an economy going, and we need the permissions to do so."

"Ah, here we go," David said, then appointed Josiah as his Chancellor. Under him, he set Michelle as the Seneschal of the city, and delegated a significant amount of his authority. "Okay, so you're now Chancellor, not Seneschal, which comes with more power. I've also delegated all power with regards to city funds to you and Michelle. That should let you appoint people to positions that the city pays."

"Good," Josiah said. "Can you increase the tax rate to ten percent? I already informed people that it was going up. We need more credits to properly invest in the city."

"How're people making credits?" David asked as he ticked the rate up as he was asked.

"We can sell crafted goods, artworks, and resources through the Market," Josiah said. "The city gets the tax rate on sales as well as purchase, so we're doing okay. Michelle worked with Braxton and a few others to create a plan that will give us a self-sustaining economy."

"Cool," David said with a grin.

"Now, we need to explore the Dungeon you set down. What does the System say about it? All I could see was the location."

"Let me check," David said. "Well, right now it's three rooms, the last has a Grunt Alpha that is level six with four Gremlins and four Imps. The first room has six Gremlins and a Grunt, while the second is eight Gremlins and four Imps. Probably a good fight for five level fours, but six is the maximum size."

He spent another minute looking at the outputs, "We need to clear it in the next ten hours or the first room gets set free."

"Barracks, this is Seneschal. Send six to the dungeon, two hours. Clear?"

David didn't hear anything, but Josiah nodded along. "Barracks, thanks," Josiah said. He looked at David, "Alexander will send six to the Dungeon. You said you could place a second?"

"Yeah," David said. He pulled up the map, and saw four locations highlighted. With a few clicks, he shared the map with Josiah. "Not a whole lot close to us, but we can designate areas up to," click, "five kilometers away from our borders. These spots give bonuses, like the first did."

"Why those?" Josiah asked.

"Uh, cultural and geographic significance?" David said.

"That makes sense for these two. This one is a museum of an old school house," Josiah said, pointing. "And that is a prominent overlook. This one, though, doesn't make sense."

The last location he pointed to was about a short distance into Browns Canyon, before the walls really closed in. They both spent a few minutes looking through the interface to try and figure it out, before David accidentally opened an overlay that drew bright yellow lines across the map. Three of the lines intersected at the location that confused them. Two lines intersected

at each of the other spots. "Ley lines!" David exclaimed. "That's why! And look, three of them intersect here too. I wonder if that is required to make a City Crystal."

Josiah scrolled the map sideways, "The fish farm only has two, and so does the fortification."

"I'm slightly confused, though," David said. "I thought ley lines would be straight, but these curve and wiggle all over."

Josiah just shrugged. "This does show us that we can put an outpost here," he tapped the map about thirty kilometers down the old railroad, just after it crossed the Arkansas but before it turned. "There is a good chance that a Corruption has formed there as well."

"Can you get someone to go through as far as the map goes and map out possible Corruption targets, and then get scouts out to examine them?" David asked.

"Yes, sir," Josiah said with a smirk.

"You were probably going to do that anyway," David said while shaking his head and holding in laughter.

"Always better to give an order that you know will be followed," Josiah winked at him.

"Back to dungeon plotting," David said. "I get the feeling that the location with three ley lines will be better, but that might also be better for an outpost or fortification."

"Then here, just off the county road. It's only a kilometer away, so we can send people to train more often than the Bridge Dungeon," Josiah said.

"Sounds good," David said, then dropped his last free dungeon. "Oh, nice, I got more options here. Whoa, I can designate this as a metal mine. As the dungeon grows, it'll generate mining rooms where it turns Essence into metal. It starts producing both copper and tin. That's bronze, right?"

"Yes. The Forge can produce bronze. How do we make the dungeon's stronger?" Josiah asked.

"Kill Daemons inside them," David said. "Uh, any Mana and Energy use inside also makes them stronger, so letting people train in them after a clear would be good too. It doesn't say how long after someone defeats the dungeon that it will repopulate. Maybe it'll tell us once one is empty?"

"What does the one you just selected say?" Josiah asked.

"Good point," David said, then poked at it. "Uh, same setup as the previous dungeon. It says that it is already populated, and we have twenty-four hours to clear it."

"Can you change the type of the Bridge Dungeon?"

"Hold on. No, it is set as an Essence producer. Huh, the Daemons defeated there provide twenty percent more Essence, and the area around the dungeon will have more Essence. It doesn't give a percentage there. Um, so more mutated animals," David started.

"Faster growing plants and animals," Josiah corrected. "How big of an area?"

"Not that big to start, two hundred meter radius, but that will increase as the dungeon grows," David said with a grin. "I guess that is good for the city."

"And having more dungeons will give more benefits," Josiah said. "But there might be an Essence producing outpost instead."

"We'll see," David shrugged. "Who is down at Salida?"

"Clancy is the scout, Elijah leads the team that went after him. Callsign is Prophet."

David shook his head, then tapped his ear. "Prophet, this is Lord and Seneschal. I saw that you formed a city?"

"Uh, yes sir," a nervous voice answered. "There were nearly a thousand people left, and only a small Corruption. Clancy told us how you all took down the first one, and there were four hundred people with Mana Dart to blast away the slime."

"Nearly a thousand!" David exclaimed. "That's amazing."

"Yes sir. Uh, I'm leading five hundred back towards Hope's Refuge, sir," Elijah said.

"Why?" David asked.

"They don't feel safe enough here, and, well, it's much harder to get everyone set up without the Market," he responded. "Most of them want to stay, but the mayor of Salida and some of her advisors are coming to shop and then return. Twenty guards plus five of them, and they got nearly all of the credits from everyone who stayed to buy stuff."

Josiah talked a bit more to him, asking questions about setup, while David looked to see if he could build another Market down there. "Looks like we can build a subsidiary Market, but only once we've upgraded the village to town and we have connected to Salida with a System-approved road." David told them. "Layering the road on top of the current one should reduce costs a bit at least."

"Michelle already started building one," Josiah said. "Mayor, we've got another five hundred citizens coming. Can you come back here to help plot out? Get Christine and Duke as well. Let's figure out the next step for advancement."

"Mayor?" David asked.

"Michelle's call sign," Josiah said. "We've been buying batches of communicators when we can."

David nodded, then tapped a few buttons and pulled up the current requirements to upgrade the city.

Upgrade Hope's Refuge to Village Tier 2
Population Required: 342/150
Buildings Required: 29/18
Wall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 1: Yes
Mayor's Manor upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: Yes
Farm food output equal to half required for population: Yes
Production Buildings Required: 8/5
All buildings upgraded to at least Level 1 Tier 4: Yes

"Uh, we can upgrade the Village to Tier 3," David said. "I'm guessing you still can't do that? And wow, these numbers are awesome. Might be able to upgrade the town again immediately afterward."

"Probably could now, but not before you promoted me," Josiah said. "Go ahead."

David clicked the button and a golden flash crossed the entire city.

Congratulations! Hope's Refuge is the first Village to advance to Tier 2!
Reward: 1500 credits to each citizen! Miniscule increase to City Essence gathering!

Upgrade Hope's Refuge to Village Tier 3
Population Required: 342/200
Buildings Required: 29/24
Wall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: No
Mayor's Manor Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: No
Researcher's Hall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: No
Total research projects completed: 9/10
Upgraded at least two production buildings to Level 2 Tier 2: 0/2

"Alright," David said. "Can't upgrade immediately. We have to upgrade the Wall, Mayor's Manor, Researcher's Hall, and at least two buildings. Also have to finish one more research project, but we aren't given a limitation on what."

"Research project will finish soon," Michelle's voice said in his ear. "I'll get teams on upgrading the buildings."

"We'll get out of this one and start on it," David said. "While you return."

Josiah nodded, and then marched out of the room. He stopped into the classroom, where four people David didn't know left, followed by Blake. No one else was in the building, so when David left, he immediately triggered the upgrade.

Do you wish to upgrade the Mayor's Manor? If so, please provide Resources, Energy, and Mana.
Resources provided: 0/14 Units worked wood, 0/5 Units worked stone, 0/3 Units worked metal, 1/2 City Upgrades (Essence Storm Lightning Rod) provided.
Energy Required: 2,856,912 (2,000,000 to substitute for City Upgrade)
Mana Required: 3,176,345 (2,000,000 to substitute for City Upgrade)

"Uh, so we need to install a City Upgrade before we try to upgrade the Manor," David said. "Otherwise, it's two million Energy and two million Mana."

"What are our options?" Blake asked.

"No idea, back to the map room," David said. The four students left, Josiah directing them to help out with the upgrade for the Wall.

"The Wall upgrade needs an Inscription," Josiah said. "The System might help with that, but it will cost a ton, just like the Manor."

"Get Ben and Julie on it," David said. "I'll go help once we've figured out the City Upgrade things. Ah, here it is. Holy guacamole, analysis paralysis here I come. There are literally thousands of options here."

"Yeah, but is a miniscule increase in fertility something we want to select," Blake said, pointing at an option to build a small shrine to a fertility goddess. "And how does that even work? Are there gods and goddesses?"

"No idea," David said. "Let's avoid those options for now. Ooh, here. Upgrade the map room interface to allow two portable connection points. Fifteen thousand City Essence, though."

"We're at thirteen thousand, nine hundred," Josiah said.

"Okay, any other options you see worthwhile that we can afford right now?" David asked, looking back at the list.

"Ten growth posts," Josiah said. "One thousand each. They last for forty days and increase growth speed on a Farm by a miniscule amount."

"Can we get less?" David asked.

"Not if we want it to count as a City Upgrade," Josiah said.

"Okay, purchased," David said. The City Crystal flared with light, and they quickly left the room to check on it. A two-meter long and twenty-centimeter diameter rod formed, with one end tapering into a rounded point and the other flat, on the ground underneath it. It took nearly a minute to create it, looking like a 3d printer was generating it one layer at a time. Once the first one was created, another immediately started to form beside it.

David checked the upgrade menu, "Looks like just starting the City Upgrade counted. We need worked wood, metal, and stone. Still generic, though who knows how long that'll last."

"I will go inform the Forge, Woodcutter's Hall, and Stonecutter's Hall," Blake said, turning to jog off.

David gave him a thumbs up before he left, then sat down next to the building and started to channel his Mana and Energy into it. Even pushing as much Mana through his channels as he could, though, his pool didn't drop at all. *Man, I've got to work on this. I wonder why I can blast out a thousand Mana in a second using a Skill, but not when I'm directly controlling it? The System must do something with it, or the runes are the key. Well, I guess I can work on tempering or training at the same time.*

He kept the flow of Mana going, but stopped the flow of Energy. Instead, he carefully directed a tiny stream of Energy to corkscrew through his channels, one unit at a time, and gently pushed against the edges with it. It hurt, something about the motion making the channel feel like it was burning and tearing at the same time.

The first time he tried, he grunted in pain and lost control of his Mana and Energy. The Energy just dissipated, but the Mana flow cutting off caused pain, the backlash feeling like heartburn and triggering a migraine. The pain dissipated quickly under the guidance of his Skill, but it still took him a few minutes to get back into the groove.

A thud caused him to look to the side and see six long planks of wood placed down next to the glowing hologram overlain across the Mayor's Manor. Blake grinned at him, then turned and ran off, obviously enthused to be back into a younger man's body.

David laughed, then focused. More pain, but he grit his teeth through it, *This is worth it. It is. It's just pain, pain is transitory, but the gain will be worth it. Especially since I can temper and channel Mana at the same time.*

An hour later, he finished one full cycle through his Energy channels, and switched to Mana. He used pure Mana to start, and the pain it gave was freezing and tearing instead of burning. An hour after that, five other people were helping with the building, actually placing the planks and stone where they went. This dropped the Energy cost, and the items themselves dropped the Mana cost to where the Manor was upgraded before he was able to do a second run through the Energy tempering cycle. He pushed through, though, and finished up yet another hour later.

The sun was still up, the planet now having a significantly longer day/night cycle than previously. He stood, stretching from sitting still and cramping muscles from pain, then looked over to see the wall flash with light as it finished upgrading. "Oh, nice!" David said, then jogged over.

A harried looking Ben was huddling behind Jamie as dozens of people chanted his name. He looked distinctly uncomfortable, and Jamie wasn't having any luck dispersing the crowd.

David pushed his way through, "What happened?" he asked loudly, engaging Invigorating Shout to overpower the crowd's voices.

They quieted, then Eric, one of the Inscriptionists, shouted, "Ben created a new Inscription that let us finish the wall super quick. It was awesome, how he just looked at the attempts me and Bryan had tried and then immediately started sketching away."

"That is awesome," David said, looking over at Ben, "but there is more work to be done. How about you all disperse and find some more projects to work on, and I'll reward Ben." A cheer rang out, and then everyone left except for Jamie and Ben.

"Th, thank you," Ben said, stumbling on a word he didn't normally due to his anxiety at being the center of attention.

"Hey, not liking crowds isn't anything to be ashamed about," Jamie said, patting him on the arm.

"I'm thinking a parade is out for a reward?" David asked jokingly.

Ben shuddered, "No th, thanks."

"What do you want? You saved us a bunch of time and resources," David said.

"Umm, upgrade the Workshop?" he answered.

"We're going to do that anyway. I'll look to see if I can find a book on Inscriptions in the Market," David said. "It'll be yours exclusively."

Ben nodded excitedly. David led them to the Market, but Jamie and Ben kept moving to head to the Workshop instead. David ducked into the Market and found all the stalls were in use. He politely got in line for one, but everyone else in it immediately stepped aside. Even the person shopping quit their progress and moved. "No, really, you all have just as much right to the Market as I do," David said.

"Sir, your time is worth much more than mine," a middle-aged woman said. "Getting you out of here faster keeps us all safer."

"Okay, thank you," David said. He popped into the menu, and quickly searched for books on Inscriptions. There were thousands, but when he filtered for a cost of fifteen hundred or less, the list was significantly more limited. After browsing for a bit, he found a book titled 'Initiate Rune Building Blocks'. It was fifteen hundred credits exactly. There was one for Journeyman Runes, but it was fifteen thousand.

David walked out with the book, his reward for upgrading the city spent to reward Ben. Ben was ecstatic about the book, saying, "This will give me a better foundation on making new Inscriptions. Thank you."

"Thank you," David looked at both of them. "Only together will we save the world. I cannot do it alone." He gave Ben a fist bump, clapped Jamie on the shoulder, then left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Two hundred and fifty people had dropped everything they were doing to help the village level again. David ran around, spending ten to twenty minutes at every building to channel as much Mana and Energy into it that he could. As soon as he hit the required number, he moved on. The stack of wooden planks and stone blocks that had formed over the last few days quickly dwindled.

Josiah, Michelle, Christine, and Duke were all redirecting the available resources all over. Very few buildings got everything they needed, with Unworked Stone and Wood replacing Worked in almost all cases. Energy replaced Mana, nearly every person in the city having significantly more Energy due to humanity's immense natural Constitution.

Finally, just as the sun was setting at the end of the extended day, every building was upgraded. David opened the upgrade menu.

Upgrade Hope's Refuge to Village Tier 3: Yes/No
Population Required: 344/200
Buildings Required: 30/24
Wall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: Yes
Mayor's Manor Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: Yes
Researcher's Hall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 2: Yes
Total research projects completed: 11/10
Upgraded at least two production buildings to Level 2 Tier 2: 5/2

"Well, we went above and beyond," David said. "Research finished too! Alright, alright, alright!"

"Okay, McConaughey," Christine said.

David laughed, "And boop," he said, mentally and physically upgrading the city to Village Tier 3. Again a gold wave flew out from the City Crystal, and each building glowed for a second.

Congratulations! Hope's Refuge is the first Village to advance to Tier 3!
Reward: 1500 credits to each citizen! Each building has a tiny increase to their durability and a small increase in efficiency for all workers inside!

Upgrade Hope's Refuge to Village Tier 4
Population Required: 344/250
Buildings Required: 30/30
Wall Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 3: No
Mayor's Manor Upgraded to Level 2 Tier 3: No
Total research projects completed: 11/15
Upgraded at least two production buildings to Level 2 Tier 3: 0/2
Sufficient food growth for entire population: Yes
Increase defensive capabilities of village: Yes

"Huh, just got to upgrade the wall, the manor, two production buildings, and do some research," David said. "Also got two more people for some reason."

A bunch of shrugs met his second statement. "Well, we're completely out of resources," Christine said. "So that'll have to wait. Almost everyone is out of Mana and mostly out of Energy."

"We should have a party," Michelle said. "The looting team has been stockpiling every bit of alcohol found."

"Does it even affect us anymore?" David asked.

"Probably won't do anything to you," Duke laughed. "Otherwise it's just an excuse to drink more!"

"I will go organize a banquet," Michelle said.

"I will set up a guard rotation," Josiah said, "Let everyone have a chance, but know that they will be severely punished for showing up drunk after their turn to party." He turned to David. "How about you go do your four hours of research, and we'll start the party right before you finish. Give the cooks time to cook and everyone to set up tables, chairs, etcetera."

"Sounds like a plan," David said. Everyone split up, but before David left he called Aly. "Shadow, are you okay?"

"Lord, hey babe. Yeah, we're fine. We found the others and are headed back. Also found a couple who had been hiding in their basement for the last week."

"Ah, that's where the two more population came from," David said. "But, if that's the case, why didn't the people coming from Salida count?"

"Maybe they need to be accepted by someone in a high enough position at the city?" she asked. "Or they could just count as citizens of Salida until they get here."

"Good point," David said. They talked for a bit, with David telling her all about upgrading the city. He walked and talked, finding himself in his new office. Nothing seemed different about the building from its upgrade, so he just shrugged and opened the research project menu. Two were highlighted.

Research Project: Enhanced Irrigation

Cost: Variable

Description: Increase the effectiveness of a Farm's output by optimizing the water irrigation provided. Select one currently built Farm to enhance.

Research Project: Dual production lines in Woodcutter's Hall

Cost: Variable

Description: Develop a more efficient layout to allow for a second production line in the same amount of space. Select Woodcutter's Hall to upgrade.

"Woodcutter's Hall, definitely," he told himself, then selected it. The current setup of the building appeared on the wall, and he got to work. The hall almost seemed to guide his movements, and he fell into the same meditative trance that he'd dropped into before. Four hours later, he hit a stopping point. "Alright, looks promising. Ooh, nice, research points one fifty six out of two hundred. No inspiration bonus."

He looked at the number, then at his status. "Ten percent more research points than my intelligence. Is that how the value is calculated? Makes sense, I guess. So researchers need to bump Int. I wonder if Wisdom has any effect? Maybe it makes an inspiration more likely. No idea. Party time." Unlike the first time he'd done research, this time he didn't get any Skill increases.

He walked out of the Researcher's Hall to find a bonfire set up in the square in front of the Mayor's Manor. Dozens of people danced while a band played acoustic instruments. When he was spotted, a cheer rang out, and he was rushed. Steve and Jack lifted him onto their shoulders, and chants of "Lord Black," "Baron Black," and "City Lord," rang out.

What in the world! He thought, though he kept the slowly rising panic and nervousness off his face. It took nearly ten minutes to get them to let him down, and they only did so when they reached an elevated table. Josiah, Michelle, Alexander, Sarah, and Emily were up there already. "We weren't sure if the others would get here in time," Michelle said, gesturing to the four empty seats, "so we kept them a chair anyway."

"Plop your butt down," Alexander said. "Summer's bringing a plate for you already."

"This is crazy," David said, waving to the crowd that was standing around. A cheer met his wave, and then everyone turned to their partners.

"Everyone is incredibly stressed all the time," Josiah said. "While they feel safe enough here, we all know that safety is an illusion. You give them hope, though, and we're going to push on that as much as we can. Now, enjoy dinner, go talk to people, and have fun."

The next two hours flew by before he excused himself. He'd been toasted dozens of times, and chugged at least four beers, but nothing seemed to affect him. *Probably have to buy or make special booze if we want to actually get tipsy*, he thought when he went into the Mayor's Manor. He dropped half his Mana and Energy pools into the City Crystal, building the City Essence stores up a tiny bit, before he found a quiet spot to sit and cultivate.

Three hours of cultivation later, and he was up nearly a quarter of an Essence. Each cycle seemed just the tiniest bit easier than the previous one, and a bit more effective as well. *Gotta keep practicing*, he thought. A glance outside showed that the party was still in full swing. David shook his head, *Not tonight. All peopled out. More cultivation? Should I try to do some Mana cultivation instead? No, Essence is more important, at least for now. Need to see if there is Energy cultivation too*. He looked outside again. *Check tomorrow, I don't want to deal with the party again. I should temper, that's what I should do*.

With an anxious face, he started to channel his Mana and Energy, focusing on following his new Skill's directions. His body felt like it was on fire, but he persevered. When he opened his eyes again, Aly was standing in front of him. "You're back!" He exclaimed, and leaped to his feet.

"Yup," she grinned while pulling him into a hug. "Not a whole lot else happened. Come on." She slid her hands into his and tugged him out of the room. "I want to dance."

"Fine," he smiled at her, letting her pull him. They partied, the crowds cheering him on again and again while Aly danced with him. Even his massively increased agility didn't stop him from looking like a spaz, while Aly was as graceful as ever.

The party finally wound down nearly nine hours after sunset, now halfway through the night. David shook his head once Aly let him finally drag her back inside. "That was fun," she said. "Been a long time since we danced until morning."

"True," David said. "But I think there is another seven or eight hours until the sun comes back up."

"The new days are still screwy," she said.

"We'll get used to them eventually," David laughed, then dragged her to their room to continue celebrating.

The next day, Aly left to train some of the hunters in stealth, while David went back to the Researcher's Hall to finish the research he'd started. Half the people were stumbling and bleary-eyed, nursing hangovers.

It only took him two hours to complete the design that was then fed into the City System. "Seneschal," he spoke into the comm system. "Just finished research that should let us double how much wood we get out of the Woodcutter's Hall. We'd have to shut it down for however long it takes to complete it."

"Roger," Josiah responded. "Have you checked what the requirements are?"

"Not yet," David laughed. "I'll head over there now." On the way, he channeled a bit of Mana and Energy into the Tax Pillar, then Sprinted over to his destination.

Do you wish to upgrade the Woodcutter's Hall with a second production line? If so, please provide Resources, Energy, and Mana.
Resources provided: 0/6 Units worked wood, 0/2 Units worked stone, 0/2 Units worked metal, 0/1 saw blade
Energy Required: 37,972
Mana Required: 206,339

"Not too bad," he told Josiah, who'd met him at the Woodcutter's Hall. "But we need worked metal and a saw blade."

"I'm wondering what the next upgrade after worked is," Josiah responded. "Or is it just going to be the addition of more specific items."

"No idea. Michelle might have a better answer," David said. "I wonder if we can get an Inscription put onto the blade to make it last longer or cut better."

"Probably," Josiah said. "We'll schedule this when the current shift ends. That should give us enough worked wood for the upgrade."

"And stone," Michelle said, walking up. "But not metal. At full capacity, the Forge only puts out one unit of worked metal a day, and they also have to create the saw blade."

"Do we need another Forge?" David asked.

"Yes, but it's not worth it now," she answered. "We don't have enough metal coming in to work. Right now, all we get is incidental harvests from the Stonecutter's Hall, and reprocessing cars that won't run. It seems like metal refined before the Essence Wave is almost worthless, only counting as a third of the same amount of newly mined metal."

"So what we really need is a mine," David said. "What about that second dungeon I put down? It's supposed to be a resource provider. How about my team and I go clear the dungeon and see what's there?"

"Sounds like a plan," Josiah said, a grin on his face letting David know that was his goal all along. "Make sure to stop by the Market and buy some mining picks, shovels, and a cart."

"Sure thing," David laughed, then called Aly, Colin, and Liz. "Do you all have time to help me clear the second Dungeon we put down and see about mining some ore?"

"I can," Aly responded.

"I'm down," Colin said.

"I need an hour," Liz said. "In the middle of something."

"Got it, meet at the bridge across the river in an hour," David said, then he jogged to the Market. *Okay, I've got over twenty-two thousand credits. Let's find some nice stuff to get.* He browsed for a few minutes, before settling into the menu for professional equipment.

Here we go, mining. A Beginner Skill Stone is only a thousand. Basic pick is ten, not too shabby, but one Inscribed for durability and sharpness is nine hundred. Only Beginner level Inscriptions too. Apprentice one is nineteen thousand, holy crap that's a huge jump. I need to work on my Inscriptions some more. In games it was always good to have a harvesting and a production class or skill or whatever the game used. So I can mine, then get someone to turn it into plates, swords, or armor. Then I can Inscribe it, and sell for a massive up charge. Heck, I could buy the non-Inscribed versions, Inscribe them, and then sell them. Not as profitable, but still makes some cash.

He looked for a few more minutes, then ended up buying two Inscribed picks, two high-quality unInscribed picks for two hundred each, a Beginner Skill Stone, and a mining cart that had a dimensional storage space like his belt for five thousand. That one he paid for out of the city funds, intending to leave it for others to use too.

With a quick glance, he saw he still had forty minutes before he told the others to meet him, so he kept looking at the Market. "Okay, I can search for items compatible with my armor. Whoa, that's a lot of things. Filter by price, under fifteen thousand. And that's most of them gone. Really? That's annoying."

Let's see, weapons, weapons, more weapons. All just minor variations on what I already have. Oh, that might be useful. Mana-crossbow, Initiate level. Creates and fires bolts out of Mana. If I have the Mana-Bolt Skill, it instead enhances the bolts. It siphons off some of my regen when I'm not using it, and then adds it to the Skill. Neat. six thousand credits though, man that's rough. What about upgrading my sword or shield?

Name: Tier-Two Mana Focusing Hilt - Arming Sword

Description: A hilt with cross-guard designed to focus Mana into the shape of a two-sided sword of moderate length. Designed to be used one-handed.

Effects: Focus 250 Mana into the hilt to create a sword. If you possess the Mana-Weapon Creation Skill, increase efficacy by 100% through the Journeyman-tier.

Durability: 2000/2000

Cost: 15000 Credits

Ow, only a fifty percent increase in efficacy for the sword for fifteen thousand credits? Not worth it, at least not until I have a better source of income than village upgrades and hunting Daemons. There's tons of useful things here that I can buy with that much money. Like this, an Energy-powered motorcycle! Only nine thousand. I could use it to get to places much faster, especially once we have built out the roads. Twelve-thousand for an Energy and Mana powered truck. Let's get that, haul even more ore back, hopefully, and transport all of us.

Name: Tier-One Material Transport Vehicle

Description: A transport vehicle that seats up to six humans. Transports five thousand kilograms in the six cubic meter storage compartment. Not suitable for combat. Capable of off-road travel.

Durability: 150/150

Cost: 12000 Credits

"And purchased," he said to himself. The pedestal in front of him started to form the items asked for. Four picks, a crystal, and then two silver pucks formed before it finished. He reached in and pulled out two picks. They grew to a fairly substantial size. One was unInscribed, made of a steel infused with a minor amount of Mana and Energy during production. It was supposed to be stronger than normal steel, and hold Inscriptions better.

The other had a series of runes Inscribed up the handle. The wood was inset with a gold powder that was lacquered over. "Huh, neat. I guess there is stuff to enhance Inscriptions," he mumbled to himself. With a thought, he stored them both in his belt, then got the other two. After that, he pulled out the two pucks. They grew to be the size of a dinner plate. One had a four wheeled cart with a large open top on it, while the other looked like a blockish pickup truck with an extended cab. He used Scholar's Vision on one.

Name: Tier-One Material Transport Vehicle Summoning Disk

Description: Place disk on ground with sufficient space around it, then activate with a small pulse of Mana.

Durability: 10/10

Ah, don't break these, he thought, almost fumbling one. He immediately stuck them in his belt, then sighed with relief when they stored. The last thing he grabbed was the Knowledge Stone, and then he got out of the way of the next person who wanted to get into the Market stall. He nodded at them, and they responded with wide eyes. "Have a good day."

"You too, uh, sir," the young man said.

David grinned, then ran off, pushing Running and Sprint to get to the base of the compound quickly. Soon thereafter, he found himself right by the new bridge across the Arkansas river. There were a dozen people fishing off to one side, but he had a good area clear. "Okay, let's see what this does," he said, pulling out the truck disk. He sent a couple of Mana into it, and it started to glow. Quickly, he set it down and backed away.

Immediately above the disk, a point started to glow. Two seconds later, the point stretched into a four meter long line, extending away from the center of the disk. It then swept three hundred and sixty degrees, forming a bright circle hovering in mid-air. The line got shorter and kept swinging around and around. Each pass added a tiny bit of material to a boxy shape in the center.

Over the next five minutes, over a hundred people had gathered around to gawk at the light show. It was only half done when Aly appeared next to him. "What is that?" she asked.

"Our new truck," he said. "Not the best looking in the world, but it runs on Energy and Mana and can carry a crapton."

"Is it supposed to be glowing?"

"It's still forming. Since this is taking so long, I guess I should trigger the mining cart one too," David said. He cleared a space, shooing people out of the same radius that the truck had, just in case. "Here we go."

The cart only made a two meter radius circle. Everyone around watched as the two items were built by the System. Luckily, they both finished at about the same time. "Well, that was awesome," Colin said. "What's that?"

"That is a spatial mining cart," David told him. "The inside is supposed to be five times bigger than it actually looks. Was pretty cheap because it doesn't reduce weight at all, so we'll have to push pretty hard to get it moving when full."

"Is that why the wheels are so large?" Liz asked.

"Uh, probably," David laughed. "Come on, it looks like it'll fit in the back of the truck." He walked over and lifted the cart. Colin grabbed the other side, and together they hauled it over to the truck and carefully set it into the cab. Their massively increased strength was on display.

"Just barely fits," Aly said, helping to guide it in from the tailgate.

The lights turned on, and David looked to see Liz sitting in the driver's seat. "Got it powered up. We'll all want to put in some Mana and Energy. The display says the tank can hold ten thousand of each."

"Neat," David said, and he walked to the doorway. He just looked at her for a second.

Liz rolled her eyes at him, then got into the back. "Well, there is a charging port on each wall," she said, pointing to a metal plate that indented itself around her hand when she touched it. "So we can all contribute."

The truck had a steering wheel very similar to Earth cars, though the entire thing was the soft metal of the charging plate. There was no radio. The dash had a few displays, speed, Energy and Mana storage, and a display of the truck with each side colored in green. "Are you all ready to go take on a dungeon?"

"Yeah!" Colin bellowed, and the crowd outside cheered. They parted when the truck started to slowly move, the engine completely silent. The ride was smooth, the shocks better than anything David had ever driven before.

"Onward," Aly said, pointing, and David laughed.

FINISH CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR CHARACTER SHEET

NAME:	David									
LEVEL:	9 Ways		Stats	Total						
FREE ESSENCE:	3510.18	20000	18000	45000	Required to Level					
TITLE:	Prime Forerunner, First Cleanser, First Lord, First Baron			22500	Required per category					
				38000	Total towards level					
CREDITS:	7047									
HIT POINTS:	4427									
ENERGY:	3825									
MANA:	3825									
Name	Base	Modifier	Final	Name	Base	Modifier	Final			
STR:	82	46	128	INT:	102	40	142			
AGI:	80	45	125	WIS:	93	44	137			
CON:	112	48	160	PRE:	85	42	127			
NERV:	86	43	129							
PATH	Lvl 5: Lord(E)									
SKILLS:	Mana-Artifact Creation (App 10), Hiking (Beg 9), Running (Beg 11), Scholar's Vision[U](Beg 8), Sneak (Beg 11), Sword Mastery (App 2), Shield Mastery (App 1) Power Attack (Beg 11), Mana Bolt (Beg 16), Vanguard's Charge [R](App 2), Pain Resistance (Beg 14), Mana-Inscription [U](Beg 8), Vanguard's Strike (Beg 12), Strengthen (Beg 15), Sprint (Beg 12), Omnicaster [E](App 2), Swordsman's Step (Beg 10), Earthen Bulwark (Beg 7), Mana Shield (Beg 15), Shield Bash (Beg 2), Scholar's True Focus [E] (App 1), Drawing (Beg 5), Invigorating Shout[U] (Beg 12), A Lord's Presence[R] (Beg 10), Lead from the Front(U) (Beg 3), Combat Reflexes (Beg 14), A Leader's Gift (Nov 10), A Leader's Due (Nov 3), Spike Field (Beg 1), Advanced Bodily Repair [S] (App 5), Earth's Unrelenting Motion [A] (App 1), Minor Muscle Efficiency (Beg 1), Swimming (Init 4)									
Completed Ways:	Way of the Novice (100/100), Tireless (500/500), Fighter (200/200), Vanguard (500/500), Marcher (200/200), Sprinter (200/200), Mage (200/200), Defender (500/500), Initiate (200/200), Sword Novice (500/500), Scholar (500/500), Leader (500/500), Novice Inscrber (500/500), Shield Novice (500/500), City Lord (2500/2500), Earth Mage (500/500), Vanguard II (750/750), Forefront I (1000/1000), Champion (1250/1250), Scholar II (1000/1000), Leader II (1500/1500), Earth Mage II (1000/1000), Tireless II (1000/1000), Unrelenting (1000/1000), Metal Mage (500/500), Lifter (500/500), Multicaster (1000/1000), Regenerator (2500/2500), Scholar III (2000/2000)									

Available WAYS:	Protector (0/500), Runner (0/500), Berserker (0/500), Scout (0/500), Mage II (0/500) Shield Beginner (0/1000), Leader III (0/3000), City Knight (0/3000), Augmented (0/10000), Frontliner (0/1000), Shieldwall (0/1000), Vanguard III (0/1500), Earth Mage III (0/1500), Body Temperer (0/2000), Metal Mage II (0/1000), Cultivator (0/10000), Swimmer (0/500), Omnicaster II(0/3000), Beast Leader (0/1500), Mana Artificer (0/3000)							
EQUIP- MENT:	Mana-Augmented Power Suit lvl 3, Mana-Focusing Hilt - arming sword, Mana-Focusing Handle - Heater Shield, Interdimensional Storage Device - Belt - Tier One							
TIER UPGRADE:	8/8	Apprentice Ways						
	1/8	Apprentice Skills						
	8/8	Level Required						

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It took them only fifteen minutes to drive to the dungeon location. County road 300 would take them most of the way, but the time since the apocalypse hadn't been kind to it. "I guess that's why we're building a new road and not just using this one," Liz commented when they had to carefully drive around another sinkhole.

"That and this turns several times. A straight shot will be better in the long run," David said. "At least, that's what Josiah and Michelle said."

"It probably would have been faster to walk," Colin said.

"True, but this way we get to test out my new wheels," David said. "And hauling the mining cart would have been a pain. Hey, at least you can do some Skill training!" There were two windows on each side of the cab, and they all opened up. Colin had been amusing himself by trying to blast specific limbs of trees with his Mana Bolt Skill.

They pulled off county road 300 into the dry stream bed that came out of Browns Canyon, the truck crunching snow that hadn't quite melted yet, even with the forcible raising of temperatures the Essence Wave caused. The windshield frosted over slightly, and David scrambled to get the defrost setting set up. Rather than blowing air, it used a tiny amount of Energy to remove the frost by heating the glass directly. A film of Mana coated the outside to keep it clear.

He dodged trees, finding gaps just big enough for the vehicle several times, before they reached a larger clearing. It was immediately obvious where the dungeon was. A large cave opening had formed, butting out of the ground ostentatiously. A flickering golden-blue shield covered the entire opening to the cave. "Seneschal, we need to make a road out this direction as well," David said. "The ground is very broken up, and hauling large quantities of metal will be impractical without it."

"Got it," Josiah said. "The group from Salida should be here in two hours. I'll split Steve's crew in half and reinforce them with volunteers."

"Thanks! I'll let you know once we finish the dungeon," David replied. "Over and out."

They pulled the truck next to the dungeon entrance and piled out of it. Colin and Liz picked the mining cart out of the bed, and David passed out the picks. Liz wanted the Inscribed one, as Colin had no desire to really get into mining. While the others examined the cart to see what they needed to do to make it work, David sat and used the Knowledge Stone.

One minute later, he opened his eyes. "I know kung fu, or Mining anyway!" He checked his Status to see he'd gotten a Mining Skill up to Initiate 4, with the ten Essence reward for the jump from Novice to Initiate. He popped into his core cave to examine the Skill rune. "Huh. Those are starting to crowd. I guess there is a limit to the number of Skills I can have and I'm approaching it. I'll have to see if I can combine more Skills to make room!"

He returned his consciousness to the outside, and saw that everyone was waiting on him. "Ready?" Aly asked.

"Let's go!" David said. He formed his sword and shield. Colin made his halberd, then frowned at it. After a few seconds, he'd shortened it to only slightly shorter than he was tall rather than extending a good meter over his head. Aly's spear seemed to suck in the light around it as she empowered it with her Shadow Mana. Liz's glaive seemed to be made of wood, and with a flick of her wrist it stretched another meter before sinking back to its normal size.

Just before the barrier, David stopped and looked back to see that Colin and Aly had formed a triangle with him. Liz stood in the middle, ready to support or heal as needed. He stepped forward, only to be met with a menu.

Do you wish to enter: Hope's Refuge Dungeon of Metal Production?

Yes/No

Note! You are significantly more powerful than recommended for this dungeon!

Recommendation: Five people of level 4.

Due to your excessive power level, all Essence gain will be repurposed to grow Hope's Refuge Dungeon of Metal Production!

"Well," David said with a shrug, "We won't get any Essence for running the dungeon, but it will power the dungeon more."

"Eh," Colin said. "Not like we'd get that much for a couple of Imps and Gremlins."

"We're just exploring now," Liz said. "Didn't you say that we wanted to use as much Mana and Energy in the dungeon as we could to help it grow?"

"Yup, good point," David said. "We probably would have picked this if it was an option anyway, just surprised me. Well, yes, we want to enter the dungeon. Wait one minute, let me scout it out. I'll come back out if it seems like something is unexpected."

A chorus of acknowledgements greeted his pronouncement. He stepped through the shimmering barrier. It felt like walking through a curtain of ice cold water naked, since the sensation ignored the armor that he wore. The room they entered into was a dimly lit cave that extended maybe twelve meters long and five meters wide. A small gold line made a circle only a meter ahead of them.

The Gremlins ambled about in a clearing between one of the half dozen stalagmites that stretched to meet the same number of stalactites hanging from the three meter tall ceiling. Behind them, the Grunt glared at the tiny Daemons, grunting at them every once in a while. None of them reacted to his presence, even though he was only five meters away.

The light in the area was strange, seeming to come from everywhere, but he couldn't pinpoint any specific thing that made the light. *Heh, something that the books were right about*, David thought, thinking back to some of the DungeonCore books that he'd read. He charged a Mana Bolt and shot it at one of the Gremlins, but the bolt dissipated against a barrier above the golden line.

"Looks like we're in a safe area for the start but you can't attack out of it," David told the others when they followed him. "I'm assuming as soon as one of us steps across the line we'll be attacked."

"How many was it?" Aly asked.

"Six Gremlins and a Grunt," David answered. He stepped forward. As soon as he crossed the safe line, all of the Gremlins turned their ugly heads towards him and screeched. They sprinted at him, the ungainly movement slightly disturbing.

Two were bowled over by Mana Bolt's, and then a Mana Grenade from Liz and Colin blew apart the rest. Colin Sprinted past David, then slammed his halberd into the Grunt's chest through its raised arms. "Well, that was easy," Aly said.

"The message did say we were grossly overpowered for the dungeon as it is right now," David said. He walked around the edge of the cavern-like room. "No metal deposits here, at least none that I can identify with my Initiate Mining Skill."

"On to the next one?" Aly asked.

"Let's go!" David acknowledged. They walked to the opening that was directly in front of the entrance from outside. The golden safety line was at the end of a very short hallway. Beyond was a maze of stalagmites and stalactites. Flickers of motion throughout the room let them know the Gremlins and Imps in this room would try ambushing them.

It didn't matter. David slapped a Gremlin that leaped at him the second he stepped into the room with a Shield Bash. It splattered, dead instantly. Two Mana Grenades were thrown. One hit the ceiling and sent two Imps spiraling to the ground. They didn't make it. The other blew apart a Gremlin and caused another to ram head first into a stalagmite. In less than a minute, they'd cleared the entire room.

Again, David didn't find any ore deposits on the walls. He even tried to break apart a stalagmite, but nothing was inside. "Well, hopefully we find something in the next room," he grumbled.

The Alpha lasted all of ten seconds, the Gremlins with him dying instantly when the Mana Grenades hit. The Imps lasted only another minute, with the last one trying to ambush Liz from hiding only to be stuck into the ceiling with a Wooden Spike.

A glimmering crystal appeared at the end of the room, only a tenth the size of the City Crystal.

Congratulations! You have cleared the Hope's Refuge Dungeon of Metal Production! You are the first to clear it! Enhanced rewards! Reward: 500kg 880kg of Copper. 60kg 120 kg of Tin.

The wall to the right of the entrance shimmered, and then little bits of copper poked out. To the left of the entrance a smaller area suddenly gained an area of tin ore. "Alright," David said. "Let's get some ore."

"I'll go pull in the cart," Aly said, running back up the path they'd taken to get there.

David pulled out his Inscribed pick, then stood like his Skill prompted to. He activated Strengthen and Earthen Bulwark, trying to train the latter Skill, and slammed the pick in the location his Mining Skill indicated.

"Okay, watch how I swing," he said, keeping his strikes slow and even. "But only if you want to get the Skill. If you don't, I can get this done in like an hour. I do think there are limits to how many Skills we can have."

"If I just smash the wall, will I get the Skill?" Colin asked.

"No idea," David said.

He kept hacking away, occasionally scooping the broken ore backward. Aly was using a shovel to scoop the ore into the cart. Colin beat upon the other wall, each hit a tiny bit more effective, but it never seemed to be the unnatural progression that the System's Skills would produce.

"Heh, doing the work and thinking that I didn't want the Skill made the System give me a prompt asking if I wanted it. When I turned it down, I was told that I'd never be able to get the Mining Skill afterward, but that I could still do better by my own actions," Colin said, gloating.

"Awesome," David said. "That means you get to help until we're done!"

It took nearly an hour, with Liz jumping in to help smash at the wall once Colin had taken the Skill risk. Aly kept busy scooping every bit into the cart. Once they were done, David nodded to the crystal. "Thank you!" He said. He and Colin grabbed onto the cart's handles and pulled. It was easier than he thought it would be.

"We're pulling a cart with a metric ton of ore, and it feels like I'm pulling a wheelbarrow of wood," David said.

"Is that what the weight feels like? You know, we don't have a wood stove in our house," Colin said.

"I'm just hoping my house is still standing," David said. "We've got a bunch of mementos I'd like to keep, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Colin said, his face falling. "I just want to know if my parents are okay? Liz's are in New York, so I doubt we'd find out anytime soon, but mine live in Castle Rock. What is Denver like?"

"I don't know," David said. "My family's in Florida. Aly's lives in Cambodia doing charity work. How're we ever to determine if they're okay?" He took a deep breath. "I've been distracting myself and focusing on getting stronger and providing for everyone in the city. We got lucky, meeting Al and getting these suits. We're the strongest people in the world, most likely. With great power comes great responsibility." David shook his head forcefully. "I don't have time to collapse in existential dread for my loved ones."

"Yeah, I know," Colin said with a sigh. "I feel the same way. That's why I'm complaining to you, since you understand."

"Come on," David said. "Let's get this to the entrance and see what it says about running it again."

"Sure thing," Colin grinned. They both engaged Strengthen at the same time, then jogged up the slight slope the dungeon had adopted to its further rooms.

They crossed the boundary into the sunshine, the blue sky more green as the Essence Wave continued to mess with the light from the sun. With a grunt of effort, they dragged the cart the last few meters to get it out of the dungeon. "So, are we going to do that again?" Liz asked.

"Let's see how long until the dungeon resets," David said. Nothing popped up when he touched the glowing sheet that covered the entrance. He tried to look through any menus he had, but nothing popped up. Finally, on a whim, he used Scholar's Vision.

Name: Metal Gathering Dungeon of Hope's Refuge

Tier 1 Level 1

Current Status: Cleared

Dungeon Refresh: 3/180 Dungeon Essence

Dungeon Level: 1,124/25,000 Dungeon Essence

Speed up Refresh and Leveling by using Mana and Energy within the dungeon boundary.

Dungeon Refresh passive gain stopped when sapient's are present within the dungeon.

"How long has it been since we left?" David asked.

"A few minutes, maybe three," Colin answered, "Why?"

"Huh, so the Dungeon generates one Dungeon Essence every minute, and needs three hours to fully recharge. We can attempt to speed it up by using Skills inside it, but we stop the passive gain," David answered.

"Go inside and use some Mana, see what happens," Aly suggested.

David nodded, then stepped inside. He used Omnicaster to send a flurry of Mana Bolts out of his left hand while casting Strengthen, Power Attack, and Spike Field. He summoned the Spikes, then smashed them, then resummoned them as soon as he could. It took nearly ten seconds before the Skill came off the cool down that some Skills had, the rune not accepting any more Mana until then.

After five minutes of blasting away, he took three steps backward to get out of the entranceway again. A quick scan made him nod. "Okay, in five minutes I managed to generate nine Dungeon Essence, so it looks like the plan of all four of us using Skills inside will work to speed it up. That'll also let it level faster. It's only four and a half percent or so through the first level," David explained.

"Sounds like a plan," Aly said. They marched into the cave and found a spot where they could attack the walls or stalagmites without risking hitting each other.

Explosions from deeper in the dungeon told David that Aly and Liz were using their Mana Grenade's. "Hah, threw mine farther," Aly taunted.

"We'll see about that," Liz muttered, then threw another grenade.

"Mine go farther!" Colin exclaimed, then tossed a Mana Grenade down the hallway, enhancing it with his Mana Bolt Skill to make it fly nearly straight. He was the only one of us to get both of the Mana Skills.

"Cheater!" Aly yelled, and burst out laughing.

"Have you all noticed that we can't seem to damage the walls at all?" David asked. "Not even the stalagmites are breaking." He demonstrated by slamming a merged Power Attack and Vanguard's Strike into the pointed rock in front of him. His sword bent around it before the Mana construct broke. A white streak was left on the dark stone, but he reached forward and rubbed it off.

"I could have sworn I broke one of the stalactites in the second room," Colin said. He turned and ran down the hall. "Yup," his voice echoed back. "But I can't scratch what's left."

"What about at the harvest spot?" Liz yelled.

"Hold on," Colin's voice got quieter as he ran deeper in. Banging sounds clanged up the hallway while the others waited. After a minute, they stopped, and Colin ran back up to them. "So, there is a small layer of lighter gray stone still at the harvest spot where I could break it off, but behind it the walls were the darker gray they are here, and they didn't take any damage when I hit them with the pick. The pick didn't either, though, at least the first few times."

"So, the dungeon seems to be indestructible when we're not actively fighting Daemons in it," Aly said. "Neat."

"Yup," David said. "Not sure how we can use it, though. Just be aware of what the walls will do to your weapons, and expect ricochets I guess."

"Back to training?" Liz asked dryly.

"Yup," David grinned at her.

They cycled through their Skills, burning immense quantities of Mana and Stamina for their levels. David especially, with the enormous increase in his regenerations that his Path gave him, and the stacking first buffs that he'd gotten with each level and a chunk of his Ways. After half an hour, David checked his notifications to see if anything had leveled.

Alright, haven't checked these in a while, but I also haven't really done much, he thought. *Okay, Hiking up one, Scholar's Vision up three, nice. Power Attack up one, Mana Bolt two, Strengthen one, Shield Bash three, and Spike Field two. Not too shabby I guess.*

"Alright, check your notifications, then let's step out and see how long we have to wait," he told everyone else. A minute later, he Visioned the entrance again. "Only five more minutes."

"Take a break and have a snack," Liz said, pulling out protein bars from her storage device. "Drink water too."

"Yes dear," Colin said, and then ducked the bar that she threw at him. She apparently knew he would duck, because the bar hit him in the forehead anyway. David and Aly shook their heads at their antics. Five minutes later, the golden-blue shield flared brightly and became brighter. David only then noticed that it had dropped in brightness, hard to distinguish against the midday sun.