

Ollie couldn't believe the stats his post-death HUD was showing him. A *twenty-two* in strength? How was that possible? S'far as he knew, a number that big was beyond allowed parameters five levels from now, much less at his current one. That incredible buff wasn't the only change either. It seemed like every aspect of his being had been affected by his last encounter.

While no other alteration—on its own—was as extreme, pretty much every aspect of his character data had been modified. In just the first few pages of the dozens and dozens that contained the minutiae of his essence as an object in The Architect's game, every line was marked with a little green pyramid or a red triangle. Understanding the full ramifications of what had happened to him was going to be impossible before he spawned—but that was only a minute away.

Regardless, this meant the rumors were true. The epic encounter that moved from dungeon to dungeon across what had once been downtown Los Angeles did indeed cause character-level data corruption in those who were (un)fortunate to experience it. However, despite the experience and the evident effects, Ollie had no idea how such a feat was possible.

Before he could ruminate on the matter further, sparkles appeared around him. They grew brighter, filling his vision with white light. Then, he was on his back in a bed, beneath a ceiling that he had seen more times than he could count now. That of his room at Guild Headquarters.

"Well," he said to himself. "Let's see what twenty-two strength looks like."

Like everyone who had been trapped inside The Architech's influence some months ago, Ollie had awoken with an intuitive but limited understanding of the new rules that governed his physical existence. Chief among them was this: "a sudden death is not permanent." It wasn't ten minutes later that Ollie was slain by a rat the size of a motorcycle.

Floating in the now-familiar darkness for the first time, he was sucked into what could only be described as a tutorial. A cheerful voice walked him through more of the basic, game-like parameters that now governed the existence of thousands. The same had been true with each subsequent death; more and more of the system was revealed to him.